

A Sermon by the Reverend Mother Crystal J. C. Hardin
The First Sunday of Advent (A)
Sunday, December 1, 2019

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

This week, the New York Times “Modern Love” column featured an article by Jenny Dolan about her relationship with her parents, the pain their optimism caused her, and how their relationship was ultimately saved.

Dolan writes, “Raised on Stephen Covey’s “The 7 habits of highly successful people” and “the Secret,” I thought anything was possible: Becoming a child star, finding true love, even finishing Ulysses. Then, when I was 26, I couldn’t stop coughing.”¹

For years, doctors searched for an answer. Finally, after Dolan coughed up blood, a CT scan revealed that she had cystic fibrosis, an incurable lung disease. She writes, “my future shifted beneath me like a tectonic plate.”

At first, I didn’t make a big deal about my disease, she said, because I didn’t want to scare my parents. As I learned more about it, though, I began to think they weren’t scared enough. My parents were like balloons that wouldn’t pop.

“There’ll be a cure,” my mother told me over the phone.
“You don’t know that,” I said.
“Yes, I do.”

To get my parents to face reality, I quoted passages from a book about cystic fibrosis that said 85 percent of patients eventually acquire a bacteria and die.

“But maybe you’ll be the 15 percent who doesn’t get it,” my father said.
“Why worry about something that hasn’t happened yet?” my mother said.

“We just want you to have hope,” he said.

Their optimism wasn’t inspiring. It was annoying. When I couldn’t get a job after graduate school, my mother said, “Why don’t you ask the universe for a job?”

“The universe gave me Cystic Fibrosis,” I said.²

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/style/modern-love-face-it-im-not-special.html>.

² This and the above is quoted and/or paraphrased from the Dolan’s article:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/style/modern-love-face-it-im-not-special.html>.

The season of Advent is a season of Hope.

Hope, of course, is not the same thing as optimism. Hope is different entirely. When things are at their darkest and most desperate, optimism on its own just will not do. It relies too much on our own resources, our own ability to save ourselves (which, ultimately, we just cannot do). And, it can rob us of the opportunity for something deeper, something far more powerful.

Optimism may look like hope or even speak of hope, but to speak of hope while refusing to meet squarely the reality of a situation – however hopeless it may seem – can be intolerable. Understandable, yes, but intolerable just the same.

Advent is a season of reckoning with the very worst while looking toward our ultimate deliverance: Christ will come again. The season of Advent is a season of Hope.

It is, in the words of Fleming Rutledge, “designed to show that the meaning of Christmas is diminished to the vanishing point if we are not willing to take a fearless inventory of the darkness.”³

Advent, then, always begins in the dark.

Listen (again) to the words of Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, “*You know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone. The day is at hand* (Rom. 13:11).”

The night is far gone. But, the day is not yet.

Christmas will find us in awe-filled celebration of the coming of our Lord in the most unexpected way: clothed in humility and vulnerability; a baby in a manger. Yet, we start a new liturgical year here, in Advent, in the not yet. Living, working, loving, struggling, dying – waiting for that baby, who was crucified, died, and buried, to come again in Glory to judge the living and the dead.

Rutledge writes, “Advent is the Time Between— between the first coming of Christ and the second coming, between darkness and dawn, between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of our Lord. It is not the time of fulfillment; it is the time of waiting. It is not the time of seeing face-to-face; it is the time of seeing ‘through a glass darkly.’”⁴

We rightly pray for “*grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life*” (Collect for Advent 1).

In the Gospel for today Jesus says, “*Watch, therefore, for you do not know on what day your lord is coming . . . You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect*” (Matt. 22:42-44).

³ Fleming Rutledge, “Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub., 2018). Almost everything I know about Advent can ultimately be attributed to Fleming Rutledge, and so a great deal of this sermon should be credited to her in one way or another.

⁴ Ibid.

Watch. And be ready. Advent turns an unflinching eye toward the world and its darkest conditions. I don't need to detail them for you – they abound and contrast deeply with the relatively shallow and deeply consumeristic Christmas spirit that threatens to drown them out altogether. But we must see them. We must not look away. It is we who are witnesses to these things. We must meet them knowing that “nothing can save us that is possible,”⁵ our help, instead, must come from the impossible: *Immortal, Invisible, God only wise*.⁶

The keeping of Advent is a deeply counter-cultural stance to take. For the rest of the world, Advent is pre-Christmas, a time of preparation – not for the second coming of Christ – but for a holly jolly Christmas. There are gifts to buy. Decorations to put up. Parties to plan. Family gatherings to anticipate (or to dread). There are red and white holiday Starbucks cups (I've had six already this week – yes, I know that's a problem). And green and red Goldfish crackers. And jingle bells is playing at the Wawa.

Desperation. Sadness. Grief. Poverty. Violence. Addiction. All risk being set aside, or pushed below, in favor of cheap comfort and sentimental good cheer.

Advent, without remorse, shows up in the midst of pre-Christmas proclaiming, “*For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man*” (Matt. 22:37-39).

This is Advent, reality uncensored, calling well-meaning, albeit shallow optimism to task and promising a yet more glorious day. When darkness will fall away and God will descend once again, as promised, to deliver us. That is the Advent Hope.

For Jenny Dolan, the diagnosis of cystic fibrosis was devastating; and the gap between that devastation and her parents' stubborn optimism deeply grieved her. As they stood firm in their positivity, she grew more extreme in her negativity. Their connection; their ability to find common ground in the love they shared suffered.

Dolan thought constantly about how to pierce their shield of optimism. She writes:

One day, I broke: “Why is the present moment never good enough,” I asked my mother. Why do things always have to be better? Why can't you accept how things are now?”

Dolan reports, “Months later, in an act not of defeat but of love, my mother threw away her affirmation cards. They had said things like: “All is well in my world” and “Everything is working out for my highest good.” And now they were trash, with the moldy fruit and remnants from a tuna can.

In the end, the facts remained the same. Dolan had cystic fibrosis, and the severity of the diagnosis, one commentator writes, “was no match for the optimism needed to deny her sadness. Finally,

⁵ from W.H. Auden's, “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio”

⁶ Hymnal 1982, #423

Jenny was able to confront the cruelty of her parents' optimism, and it was only then that a new perspective could be heard. The shield of positive thinking fell. And something more palatable [, more promising]—hope—came in its place.”⁷

As Christians, we offer this promise to one and all: Christ will come again; as will his justice. He will destroy suffering and evil in all forms, forevermore. About this, we are not optimistic, we are sure.

Rutledge writes, “To be a Christian is to live in expectation of that fulfillment. The life of the church, lived in solidarity with those in darkness, carries with it the embodiment of a certainty: when He comes again, it will be the God of mercy and no one else, and it will be morning.”⁸ This is the Hope we attest to: this is the Advent promise.

Come Jesus Come.

Amen.

⁷ Ethan Richardson, “Another Week Ends: Stubborn Optimists, New Parents, Non-Parents, Backwards Empathy, Future Anxious Thoughts, and a Tale of Two Churches,” 22 Nov. 2019, <https://mbird.com/2019/11/another-week-ends-stubborn-optimists-new-parents-non-parents-backwards-empathy-future-anxious-thoughts-and-a-tale-of-two-churches>.

⁸ Rutledge, “Advent”