

EYES WIDE OPEN

Don't you just hate it when Thanksgiving and the First Sunday in Advent fall on the same weekend? It seems the holiday founded by the Pilgrims really gets crowded out. Of course, Macy's has ended their famous Thanksgiving Day Parade with the arrival of Santa Claus for years. And other stores have been decked out in tinsel and holly for weeks already. The Family Circus cartoon published in Thanksgiving's newspaper this year captured it well. Young Billy is sitting in front of an empty plate, face covered with bits of gravy, and saying "That tasted good! Now, let's start on our Christmas lists!" (Connecticut *Post*, 11-24, 05)

Yes, jamming up Thanksgiving and Christmas happens *everywhere*, but this is the church, for crying out loud, and you'd think we could do it differently! But like time itself, the liturgical calendar waits for no man, woman or child, and so, though we just sang "Come Ye Thankful People Come" *last* Sunday, *this* Sunday it's time to begin preparing for Christmas. And so we have lit the first Advent candle.

The other day a colleague suggested that he'd thought about dealing with this dual season by having an Advent Turkey. He said we could just have someone come down the aisle this morning carrying a platter with a roast turkey on it, with four candles stuck in the bird. Three purple ones, maybe one under each wing, and the third tucked into a drumstick, and a pink one right where the stuffing normally goes.

I understand his desire to be still mindful of Thanksgiving, even though it is already Advent, but I don't think we need to go to such extremes. In fact, odd as it may seem, the gospel lesson appointed for this First Sunday in Advent, shows us a way to keep the spirit of Thanksgiving alive not only today, but throughout Advent, and even throughout the year.

During Advent we are, of course, preparing to celebrate Christmas, the birthday of Jesus, the one we call the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior. We are preparing to celebrate the Incarnation, the Christian doctrine that states that in this Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, we can see God fully revealed if we only pay attention.

Traditionally Advent has also been a time to consider the Second Coming, the Christian doctrine that states Christ will return, Christ will come again. That is why this Sunday finds us reading this rather strange text from Mark. It is part of a chapter in that gospel that is sometimes called the Little Apocalypse.

The text speaks in very dramatic terms, using very powerful images to describe the Second Coming. A darkened sun, falling stars, the Son of Man stepping out of the clouds. Earlier in the chapter there are numerous warnings about various evils that

will befall the world. “Brother will betray brother and a father his child,” (13:12) says the text at one spot. At another place we read “there will be suffering such has not been from the beginning of creation.” (13:19) And in the most quoted verses in this chapter we read: “[There will be] wars and rumors of war . . . there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.” (13:7-8) In the midst of all this calamity, though, there is hope, claims the text, for these are but signs of Christ’s imminent return. No one knows exactly when it will happen, says the text. Not even Jesus himself, who is the speaker in this part of Mark. “But about that day or hour,” he says, “no one knows.” (13:32a)

So what are we to do? “Keep awake,” says Jesus, “for you do not know when the Master will come” (13:35)

There are, of course, those who take all this quite literally. Who point to various events and say, “Jesus could be showing up any day now! Just watch the skies—you’ll see him descending from on high, riding a white stallion, leading a band of angels!” And that’s all well and good; scholars feel that is exactly how most of the first century church interpreted this and similar passages.

But it is now the twenty-first century. Two thousand years have come and gone. And Jesus still hasn’t come back. At least not in the literal manner some expect.

But there is another way to look at such passages. There is another way to interpret such texts. For while the Second Coming that we are reminded of each and every Advent hasn’t occurred in such a dramatic fashion, I would suggest that the Second Coming has happened, is happening and will happen. I would suggest that, in fact, Christ is showing up all the time and that the question is not where and when will it happen, but rather will we be awake? Will our eyes be open? Have we, do we, will we see it when it happens? For this passage reminds us that even in the midst of the most dire circumstances, even in the midst of family turmoil, natural disaster and warfare, one can see God at work. Even in the most trying of times, maybe especially in those times, we can and will see Christ come again and again and again. And in that we can take hope. In that we can find something for which to give thanks. No matter what day it is: the fourth Thursday in November, the First Sunday in Advent or the Fourth of July.

But we must be awake. We must be alert. We must have eyes wide open. Expectant eyes, eyes filled with hope. As Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast says in his wonderful book about gratitude: “The eyes of hope are grateful eyes . . . [and] grateful eyes expect the surprise of finding beauty in *all* things.” (*Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, 142)

Yes, Christ is coming again, and in fact shows up all the time, even and especially in tough times, in hard times, in times that try our very souls. And for that we can be grateful. In that we can take hope. But we’ll never know it to be true unless we keep awake. Unless we watch with eyes wide open.

It's a tough time, right at the moment, for many, many folks who've been displaced by Hurricanes Rita, Katrina and Wilma. They've been scattered across the country and are dependent on others for the basics of life like food and shelter.

But they are not alone, for millions of Americans have turned their attention to the needs of hurricane victims and have given a great deal. But because of that folks seem to be tapped out, and local agencies and organizations have found it very difficult to raise the needed funds and supplies for the poor right here in Connecticut.

An editorial in last Sunday's Connecticut Post described some of the shortfall. One food bank in Derby reported that they were hundreds of turkeys short of their need to supply twelve-hundred families with Thanksgiving Dinners. A food pantry in Bridgeport reported running out of cereal for the first time in its history. The editorial noted: "Officials at most soup kitchens and food banks in the greater Bridgeport region say that the long range outlook for contributions is dismal, especially for the [winter] . . . months." (Connecticut Post, 11-20-05, B-1)

But in the same edition of the paper, another piece. A tiny article on the bottom of page A-3, about Florence Mahanoy.

Florence is from Mississippi. Her home was totally destroyed by Katrina. She's now living in Bridgeport with a relative, hoping to get her life back on track.

Last Sunday, though, a food drive was held in Bridgeport—and Florence was going to be there to donate a turkey and some canned vegetables.

"It may not be much," said this woman living from day to day herself, "but I want to do what I can." (Connecticut Post, 11-20-05, A-3)

And so Christ showed up again, last Sunday, at a food drive in Bridgeport in the guise of a flood victim from Mississippi. As one worker there said: "I don't know how much faith and energy I would have if placed in her position. She's truly an amazing woman . . . a gift from God." (Ibid)

It was an apartment in the projects in New Rochelle. It was as run down as you can get. Peeling paint, a broken refrigerator, musty odors that won't go away, rats running through the rooms. Cynthia Anderson lived there with her two boys and her husband.

I suppose she could have continued to put up with the apartment itself, after all, it takes more than rooms to make a home. But when her husband turned violent, she had to think of the safety of her sons. So she called the police.

Joe Poggioli was the officer who responded to the call. Cops don't like to make domestic violence calls—they are not only dangerous, they are often a lesson in futility. When he got to the apartment, he found the two boys huddled together in their bedroom, hiding under a bed sheet—with roaches running all over the place.

He could have just handled the presenting situation—arrested the husband and moved on. But Joe Poggioli hates bugs, and he couldn't get the picture of those two boys out of his head. But when he told his wife about it, and she suggested they rehabilitate the apartment, he went to work. He rounded up twenty-five of his fellow officers, got Cynthia Anderson's permission to repaint and refurbish the apartment, and just this past Wednesday, Cynthia and the boys moved back into their sparkling new home.

And so Christ came again, last Wednesday, to the projects in New Rochelle, looking like twenty-five cops. As Cynthia said, "None of this would have happened but for God." (New York Times, 11-24-05, B-5)

When you think of tough neighborhoods, when you think of troubled cities, Hartford may not be the first place that comes to mind. But in the North End of our capital city, just walking the streets can be a risky undertaking.

A week ago Saturday two shootings resulted in five teenagers being sent to the hospital—one of them is still there. Last August an argument in the neighborhood resulted in a thirty-two year old man being shot to death. Drugs are rampant, and gunfire is a common sound. Some parents keep their children indoors all the time for fear they might get mowed down in a spray of bullets.

For most of us, Thanksgiving Day was a time of feasting. But in the North End at 40 Vine Street, it was a day of fasting four Rev. Cornell Lewis and three other men who are part of a group known as the Men of Color Initiative. Dressed in marigold colored jackets, The Men of Color Initiative patrols the neighborhood year round, and walks children to school. But despite their efforts the gun violence continues, so they decided to fast, as Lewis said, "to call attention to the problems these people have."

And so Christ returned once more, last Thursday, to the North End of Hartford dressed like four black guys in marigold jackets. All because, as Rev. Lewis said when he greeted one of the folks in the apartment where they held the fast, "Yes I'm hungry—hungry for you to stay safe." (New York Times, 11-25-05, B-7)

Maybe in the end it's not such a bad thing when Thanksgiving and the First Sunday of Advent fall on the same weekend. After all, as we prepare for celebrating Christmas we cannot help but be grateful—not just because Christ came to Bethlehem, but also because he keeps coming back to places like Bridgeport and New Rochelle and Hartford, and yes, even Westport. And while some might say that little things like a donated turkey, a refurbished apartment and four guys

fasting on Thanksgiving hardly count as real signs of the second coming, think what happened the first time with a pregnant teenager, a stable full of animals and some shepherds keeping watch at night.

Happy Thanksgiving.

Happy Advent.

Keep awake!

**Amen
John H. Danner**