

Advent 3

December 11, 2022

So, our Advent study began with the invitation from Ann Weems to find our kneeling places and make time for our Lord of lords and King of kings; last week, she reminded us that our God is a God of Surprises, who acts and does things in ways that we might not expect and that we should spend our lives in expectation of the unexpected. This week, she continues to help us to refocus our Advent vision as she writes,

GIFTS FROM GOD

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;

God's mercies never come to an end.

They are new every morning.

The Lord God gave the peoples of the earth a garden,

And the people said, "That's very nice God, but that's not enough. We'd like a little knowledge please.

The Lord God gave them knowledge,

And the people said, "Now that we have knowledge, we'd like things."

The Lord God gave the people things,

But they always said, "That's not quite enough."

So the Lord God gave them gifts unequalled:

The Sun

Lightning and Thunder

Rain and Flowers

Animals and Birds and Fish

Trees and Stars and the Moon.

God gave them the Rainbow

God parted the Red Sea and gave them Manna

God gave them Prophets

and Children

and Each Other,

But still the people said, "That's not quite enough."

God loved the people,

And out of ultimate merciful goodness

God gave them the Gift of gifts -

A Christmas Present never to be forgotten -
God gave them Love
In the form of God's Son,
Even Jesus Christ.
There are some who don't open their eyes or their ears or their hearts
And they still say that's not quite enough.
They wander through the stores looking for Christmas.
But others open their whole being to the Lord,
Bending their knees to praise God,
Carrying Christmas with them every day.
For these the whole world is a Gift!
(from *Reaching For Rainbows* The Westminster Press 1980)

Ann was a person with a vision of God which seems to me to have been one of a loving, caring Creator with a mischievous streak – a God who does things which are unexpected at unexpected times, of birthing the impossible (witness the starfish and the platypus!) and who delights in cuddling creation when anyone or anything is hurting! She is convinced that God's promises never get stale because they are renewed every new day, even if the sun is not shining.

Let me continue my Sinai saga... The night spent sleeping in the tire-track of the Land Rover on the desert floor was wonderful (at least I think it was but what do I really know – I was asleep!) except...

At around four in the morning, I woke for some strange reason and thought I heard a voice saying, "Get up and climb the wadi". I don't normally believe in "voices" but this time it seemed so real that I felt compelled to listen and then do what I was told. Because the vehicle was parked right beside the wall of the stream bed, I had no great difficulty in scaling the height. Once at the summit, I turned on the torch, wrapped the sleeping bag over my shoulder and looked for a nice place to sit. There was a very large boulder nearby and so there I went, like Alice in Wonderland and sat down, leaning against the hardness and yet feeling all "cacooney". I don't know how long I sat and just stared into the darkness but I do believe I fell asleep for a while.

I was awakened by the slightest hint on the horizon. Sitting up, I watched as the sunrise came – it sorta crept across the surface of the surrounding hills and came like maple syrup on hot pancakes, dripping slowly down into the wadi, creating a shadow as it hugged the Acacia tree

that grew like a sentinel guarding the waterway against the desert marauders. As I watched the shadow grow and deepen, I heard a sound rise from beyond the horizon. A group of Bedouin children came with their parents into the wadi to greet us and cook breakfast. What a sound that it – the sound of children jumping for joy as we handed them paper and coloured pencils which David suggested we carry at all time for this very occasion! After a superb spread, they left for their camp and we continued through the bleakness to our destination – the monastery of Santa Katerina at the base of Mount Sinai. After our tour and another feast, we headed to a little village in an oasis where we were to spend the night.

We were wakened at three in the morning and bundled into the trucks and were off into the darkness. After a short ride, we were told to get out and thus did we stumble in our sleepiness onto the desert floor. As our eyes adjusted to the blackness of it all, we saw, heard and above all else smelled the camels! Each of us was hoisted onto the back of these "ships of the desert" and began our ascent up Sinai. I was on the lead camel for some reason and learned to trust with my life the young Bedouin lad who walked before the camel, guiding me with his attached rope ever onwards and upwards. At one point, I turned carefully and looked behind me – all I saw was this magnificent trail of pinpoints of light from the flashlights held by all the other guides and their camels as they followed us. I will never forget that vision of living light moving and swaying in the quiet of the night.

We finally reached the summit and dismounted. Bishop John gathered his little sheep together and said, "There's more", pointing up the mountain, and so did we follow our good shepherd towards the very summit. As we came to the high point, the sun broke against the crag and we were flooded with the most amazing sunrise I have ever experienced – SUNRISE ON SINAI – what a trip! There, in the early morning like of Ash Wednesday, Bishop John celebrated Eucharist with us and signed us with the sign of the Cross using ashes which he had brought from Ottawa. Little has topped the feeling of that Eucharist, even some forty years and hundreds of Masses later!

Ann speaks in her poem of the God who gives and a people who were not satisfied with the largesse of the Lord. We have all grown up in a world in which our culture tells us that "the bigger the better" and "you can never have enough stuff". As I ponder this, I think of the scene in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone when Dudley Dursley, Harry's nasty cousin, after receiving some thirty presents on his birthday screams and has a tantrum because, in his opinion, he hadn't been given enough! For so many of us, we measure worth and value by the size of things – our houses, our vehicles, our TV sets and all the other "trappings" of our lives. We look at our neighbours with either disdain or jealousy because of the amount of their "stuff"

compared to ours; we suffer from the most insidious of dis-eases: mammon illness, which is simply a condition in which we are “possessed” by our possessions. Like the rich young man who meets Jesus and asks what he must do to enter the kingdom and blanches when Jesus tells him to let go of his stuff, we often are dominated and controlled by what we own. How many of us have attempted to de-clutter (the sport of the 2020s!) only to be unable to let most of our stuff go even though we haven’t used the stuff in years and years?

Ann reminds us that God has gifted to us the greatest offering of all – his Son. None of the presents under a tree, none of the tinsel and ornaments shine as brilliantly as does He; nothing offered on Black Friday is as priceless as the One who came among us not as a King but as a child – helpless, needing, reaching out hands of love for our love. This is the true Gift of Christmas – remembering that we are so beloved of God that He comes among us, lives as one of us so that we can feel the closeness and intimacy of the One who created all, who loved all and who sacrificed all for all.

This Advent, let us try a little harder to see beyond all the “goods” of the season and focus on the Good of the season – the One who loves us with his All.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT THIS WEEK

1. How can I better rise each morning with a grateful heart ?
2. What can I offer the Lord in return for His love for me ?
3. How can I “ carry Christmas with me every day” as Ann writes ?
4. How can I open myself more and more before the Lord in thanks-giving?
5. What I am truly grateful for ?