**Isaiah 40:1-11**

**2 Peter 3:8-15a**

**Mark 1:1-8**

I have grown to love Advent. This is a fairly recent change. I’ve spent much of my life dreading the month between Thanksgiving and Christmas due to holiday-inspired anxiety: When will I get up the decorations? Especially now that all my neighbors’ homes are twinkling merrily away and mine is one of the few dark spots. Will I find the right gifts? An electronic potato peeler that’s also a Smartphone? A lifetime supply of lavender sashay? I know! A foot massager! Wouldn’t everyone on my list love a sonic foot massager?

If you were planning on giving any of those gifts for Christmas, I’m sorry I blew it for you. Actually, if you were planning on giving any of those gifts, we need to have a conversation.

Every year I have promised myself that I won’t go nuts. Every year I have said, “This year, I will be stress-free for the holidays!” Some years I do better than others. And all the while the Church in the background quietly and consistently offers the antidote.

It is in the form of an alternate narrative. The prevailing narrative is: buy, spend, give, go, eat; bake. It’s wonderful, yes, but like most of our conventional narratives it is shallow. There is more – so much more – to this time of year. And you just can’t get it on Amazon-dot-com. You can only get it here: at church. However much the secular world dismisses church, we are the keepers of mystery and wonder.

You may know that the late poet and novelist Madeleine L'engle was an Episcopalian. So was her family. In fact her son-in-law, Alan Jones, was the long-time dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. So Madeleine has some serious Anglican pedigrees. She wrote these lines about Advent:

This is the irrational season

When love blooms bright and wild.

Had Mary been filled with reason

There’d have been no room for the child.[[1]](#footnote-1)

“If Mary had been filled with reason.” We tend to forget how irrational all this is: *God became human*. It’s so simple to say. But so difficult to believe. The very concept of Infinite Being entering any part of Creation, much less the human part, is difficult to believe.

Just to say: “Well, God is God, so anything God wants to do, God can do” does violence to the Incarnation. That kind of thinking minimizes what happened on that first Christmas. Consider how an ancient Christian theologian thought about God. Consider Anselm of Canterbury who, if he were alive today, would be almost 990 years old!

Anselm struggled for what to say about God. He decided on this phrase: “God is *that* greater than which nothing can be thought.” So you stretch your mind as far as it can go – like thinking about where the universe ends – and there is finally a place where your mind can think no other thought. And that is where God begins. “God is *that* greater than which nothing can be thought.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

That makes God inconceivable. Yet God *was* conceived in the womb of Mary. It is irrational says the poet. We worry about how acceptable this “irrational” God is. Who could believe such things? How can you even expect someone to believe such fantastical things?

The late Phyllis Tickle, a popular Christian author, talks about how difficult it was for our ancestors to accept that the Earth is round. She says, “The world was flat so long as the majority of our forebears thought it was flat. Its being round was simply not within their imagining and was therefore beyond their engagement.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

“Engaging with” is the key to accepting what seems irrational, like a round Earth; like Infinite Love coming among us as human. The only way we can begin to engage with this is through the power of poetry and myth – not in the sense of untruth or fairytale – but in the sense of truth beyond our comprehension. Engage the story. That is what we do during Advent. We engage with Jesus, and Mary, and John the Baptizer.

Especially with John. When his aged mother Elizabeth was found to be with child, her husband was so dumbstruck that he was, well, struck dumb for the entire term of his wife’s pregnancy. He regained his voice only when John was born. That might very well be a poetic flourish, a man being rendered mute just because he didn’t believe his wife could be pregnant. But the larger truth it gives us is *that silence is a very appropriate response around such wonders as God-with-us.*

John lived an unusual life. He lived in the desert where mystics long before him and long after have gone. There he spent his days immersed in God: talking to God; listening to God.

So that when he came out of the desert, he had something to say. He actually had something *worth* saying. So many messages today just aren’t worth hearing or engaging with or getting worked up over. This is the tyranny of the superficial and the trivial and it is the watermark of our time.

But John the Baptizer had something worth saying. And it resonated. Our gospel text says people from the whole Judean countryside came out to hear him. And people from Jerusalem came out to hear him. What great demographics! The countryside would be like today’s red states on political maps – more rural; conservative. Jerusalem would be the blue – very urban; liberal. John’s message didn’t escape anyone.

What he said was simple. He said repent. Somehow that message never seems to wear out. *Repent* means to turn around. It means stop. Just stop; turn around; and see God. Sometimes seeing God in our lives just takes time to notice.

Repent also means to get real with our selves. Everyday life humbles us – just naturally. No great penance is required for us to experience our limitations and short-comings, just a little self-awareness. Add a bit of insight and we can see how those limitations and short-comings hurt others. We can hurt, wound and confuse those around us, never meaning to. All of which leads us to realize our constant need for God. Jesuit James Martin says it is a grace to know one’s sinfulness.

Stop; turn around; see God. Get real with yourself. These are the themes of Advent, along with waiting; eager expectancy. Advent teaches that our attitude towards God should always be eager expectancy because every time a channel is made in our lives for God; God comes. Every time our hearts are open to God; God enters. Every time God comes to us and enters anew, it is with a fresh gift of Divine Life. Evelyn Underhill, the revered Anglican mystic and writer says, “We should think of the whole power and splendor of God as always pressing in upon our small souls.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

How could God be that available? It does seem irrational. Actually, it seems scandalous!

This is the irrational season

When love blooms bright and wild.

Had Mary been filled with reason

There’d have been no room for the child.

Amen.

1. “After Annunciation” in *A Cry Like a Bell*, Madeleine L’Engel, Shaw Books, 2000 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard John Neuhaus, *God with Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas,”* p. 17. Edited by Greg Pennoyer & Gregory Wolfe; Paraclete Press; 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why,* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008), p.35 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Synthesis,* a sermons-help publication, for Advent 2, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)