

THE ALWAYS NEW

Advent morning of recollection - Omaha, 2018
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PRELIMINARY

The season of Advent is a liturgical given. It comes without our having scheduled it and it comes at a time, when we are bombarded by commercial advertising and external decorations. So, we run the risk of allowing it to pass us unnoticed. Yet Advent is *THE ALWAYS NEW*, provided that we allow it to be new for us. Thus, I commend you for taking time today to ponder the spiritual significance of this very special time of the liturgical year.

Our gathering today is certainly not a social club gathering, but a faith gathering of preparation to refresh our awareness of the meaning of this season, clearly much more than shopping, lights and decorations. We want to re-discover *the reason for the season*, a season that recurs every year, yet remaining *THE ALWAYS NEW*.

We are here on this morning of recollection, because we want to ponder what God's desire for us might be –not only for this season, but for the entire year and indeed for our entire life. But God's desire for us is not something secret, not something that God has not declared for us already. Remember the scene of the Transfiguration. The three apostles see Jesus transfigured and, as they are still overwhelmed by what they see, they hear a voice from heaven declaring: *This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him*. This is God's desire for us, that we *listen* to Him, God's beloved Son.

So, how do we listen to God's beloved Son? We can do this in different ways. In Scripture God's manifestation to Israel was threefold in form. There was a *Sight Revelation*, such as in the theophanies: to Moses in the burning bush, to Elijah on Mount Horeb. There was also a *Word Revelation*: God's word proclaimed to Israel by the prophets. And there was a *Deed Revelation*, of which the liberation from Egypt's slavery and entry into the promised land was for Israel the foundational revelation.

For us, *listening to God's beloved Son* will not be listening to a *Sight Revelation*, since we no longer see Jesus, the beloved Son. We do need to listen to God's beloved Son's *words* and *deeds*. We do listen to his *words*, as we pray over the gospels. We listen to his *deeds*, as we ponder what Jesus *does*, which is what we will be doing in this morning of recollection.

What we prepare to celebrate in this season of Advent is precisely the beginning of Christ's *deed of redemption*: Christmas. But this *redemption deed* did not happen all of a sudden on Christmas night. It is a sequence of faith events that we need to consider:

1. Incarnation: Jesus is conceived. We celebrate this on March 25th.
2. Gestation: not a liturgical moment, since it is not even a moment, but an important time.
3. Nativity: the culmination of this beginning of the redemption deed. December 25th.

So, let us consider separately these three times of the beginning of Jesus' *redemption deed*. My first talk will consider Incarnation and the second talk will cover Gestation and Nativity.

INCARNATION

The Spiritual Exercises imagine the Trinity holding a counsel, as the triune God contemplates the very messy situation of humanity. This is not the first time the triune God sees humanity in a mess, the very humanity God had created. It had already happened at the time of the flood and at that time God had decided to “purge” humanity through destruction. This time the Trinity in counsel decides not to destroy, but to redeem with a different type of flood, a flood of compassion. The current world situation is also a sad mess –just read the news. We certainly need redemption, but the same incarnation event we remember at this liturgical time of Advent will not happen again, at least certainly not in the same way.

At the imagined counsel of the Trinity it was decided that the Second Person become like one of us, to show us how human life can be lived in a way acceptable to God. Incarnation happens. Incarnation is the *big bang* of redemption, but it is only its beginning. Other stages –gestation, birth, visible life– will follow according to human nature. At a moment, when God-become-man cannot speak words to us, we need to listen to this extraordinary *deed* of Incarnation.

So, what is Incarnation? What did God do in being conceived? For us, being conceived is ultimately being placed in existence without being consulted –how could we be consulted, when we did not yet exist? For God, being conceived was a deliberate choice. God did not need being conceived in order to exist, even less in order to exist happily. In fact, it is through being conceived that for the first time God becomes capable of suffering.

At the Incarnation Jesus brought together in himself divinity and humanity. Since that moment there is a point of convergence, where divinity and humanity touch, and that point of convergence is Jesus of Nazareth, that embryo, that eventually grown-up man. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, at that point of convergence the human DNA intersects the divine DNA. Since then we cannot touch divinity without somehow in Christ touching also humanity and we cannot touch humanity without somehow in Christ touching also divinity, which helps us understand the words of the grown-up Jesus in the parable of the final judgment [Mt. 25: 31-46]. At a moment when God incarnate cannot yet utter words, we need to listen to this *deed* of Jesus in becoming an “isthmus” between God’s divine continent and our human continent. Incarnation is God’s gigantic step toward closeness.

But closeness is a multi-faceted concept. *At the physical level* closeness is certainly a two-dimensional concept of mutuality: I cannot be physically close to you, unless you are physically close to me. *At the affective level*, however, closeness can be just a one-dimensional rapport. Think of good old Charlie Brown having a crush on the little red-haired girl, while she either does not notice or pretends not to notice. Charlie Brown is affectively very close to the little red-hair girl, while she is affectively distant from him. This can and does also happen *at the spiritual level*. God is always close to us, but we retain the freedom to pretend not to notice. Even St. Augustine in his *Confessions* admits that much to God: *You were with me, but I was not with you*. Clearly, a one-dimensional, one-way spiritual closeness. Metaphorically, we can say that God has a crush on us, but we retain the freedom to pretend not to notice.

This gigantic step of closeness to us taken by God at the Incarnation remains always operative on God’s side. There may have been moments in our lives –perhaps first communion, graduation, birth of a child, a retreat...– when we became keenly aware of God’s closeness to us and yet at other times we perceive God as distant. There is a story (probably apocryphal) that is pertinent in this context:

Somewhere in rural America and elderly married couple had for many years used Sunday afternoon to go out for a car ride in the country side. The wife had never obtained a driver’s

license, so the husband always did the driving. On one Sunday a pickup truck pulled in ahead of them from a trunk road and, as the truck lined up in front of them, they could see a young couple sitting very cozily together with plenty of space between the girl and the passenger door. The wife remarked: *Oh, remember when we were young, how we used to sit together like that?* The man did not blink, he kept on driving, but he did say: *I have not moved.*

Perhaps funny as a story, but it can speak to us more deeply than just that. At those times, when we perceive God as distant, if we listen honestly, we can hear God say: *I have not moved.*

Because in our present life-setting –especially in our digital environment– our attention is drawn in so many directions, we need to remain aware of God’s closeness to us. We often hear the expression *finding God in all things* as a key component of Ignatian spirituality, yet the fact is that in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus St. Ignatius urges all Jesuits to *seek God in all things*. Seeking is an intentional act, while finding does not have to be: I can find a coin on the floor without having sought it. *Seeking God in all things* is what we can do on our part. *Finding God in all things* is gift.

But seeking God in our dysfunctional world requires *faith vision*, which is more than faith, more than just believing. Allow me to propose a mental exercise.

If someone presents to me a white sheet with a scattering of dots on it and asks me what those dots mean, I would have to confess that I do not know. But now I superimpose on that page an acrylic overlay with the outline of the U.S. map and the state boundary lines on it, and suddenly I recognize at least some of the points as: New York, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles...

Faith vision is not exactly the same as that overlay, but it is not totally different either. The data of our life experience are just data, call them points. They are the same for the believer and the unbeliever. It is when we superimpose on them a faith overlay that the same data take on a faith meaning. Faith vision does not change the data of our experience, but it changes how we read those data and thus it changes how we respond to them. This is how we *seek God in all things* and, with God’s help, *find God in all things*.

So far, the first step of this event of God’s closeness to us: Incarnation. Obviously, Incarnation is and remains a mystery: not something i-rational, but simply meta-rational, beyond our mind’s natural grasp. The psychiatrist and spiritual director Gerald May wrote that our society is more comfortable with mastery than with mystery. So, as we now take time for prayer, we want to ponder Incarnation as mystery, not as something for us to master. We should not attempt to, in the words of Thomas H. Green, S.J., “*eff*” the *in-effable*.

I am not saying “The Lord be with you”, as you pray, since Advent is telling us that the Lord **is** with us. Remembering Augustine’s confession to God, my prayer for you is: *May you be with the Lord.*

END OF FIRST TALK
time for individual prayerful reflection

GESTATION

The Incarnation *deed* we pondered in the first talk is now “simmering” during the needed time of gestation.

As we continue in our desire to *listen to Him, my beloved Son*, we may wonder what we can listen to during these nine months of gestation that are not celebrated liturgically. A fetus does not utter *words* nor does it do *deeds* we can listen to –except perhaps kicking inside Mary’s womb, to which we cannot listen. But the very *deed* of Jesus’ being inside Mary’s womb has consequences and we want to listen to some consequences of that *deed*, because God’s entering our lives has consequences and indeed our very here today is one such consequence. Both Luke and Matthew open for us a window into the spiritual significance of that inconspicuous *deed* of being gestated.

From Luke’s gospel we learn about Mary’s visit to Elizabeth during this gestation time, right after her *fiat*. When something exceptionally good or bad has taken place in our lives and we are not in a position to explain it to others, we tend to be absorbed by it and to be less concerned about what happens to others. That is not the case with Mary. Something truly extraordinary has taken place in her life, but she learns about Elizabeth’s unexpected pregnancy in her advanced age and Mary reaches out to accompany Elizabeth in the last quarter of her pregnancy, even as she is aware of the Child’s inconspicuous *deed* of being in her own womb. Mary is a woman for others.

The gospel of Matthew opens for us a delicate window into the trying predicament of both Mary and Joseph as a result of Mary’s gestation of the child. Mary has been away for a few months in the hill country of Judea and, on returning, her pregnancy is beginning to show. Joseph notices it and he knows that the child is not his. He also knows that Mary is not a loose girl. So, what has happened? Was Mary assaulted in that hill country? He loves Mary dearly and he knows that, if he says that he is not the father of that child, Mary could be stoned as an unfaithful betrothed girl. So, he decides to be the fall guy. He will simply fade away and be thought of as an inconsiderate father. Then comes the dream. And Joseph trusts the dream and receives Mary.

Mary too finds herself in a very trying predicament. She senses the anguish Joseph is experiencing. She knows what has taken place in her, but she also knows that her explanation would not be believed not just by Joseph and by her own parents, but also by the Nazareth town folks. Her reputation and indeed the child’s future reputation are at stake. Yet she says nothing. Like Joseph, she trusts and she waits.

What we find disconcerting is that all this is the result of God’s having entered their lives, a consequence of Jesus’ inconspicuous *deed* of being in Mary’s womb, a consequence we want to listen to in prayer. We find it shocking that God’s closeness could make things less than comfortable for us. We need to review our expectations and trust God’s presence in our lives, even if it causes some human discomfort.

Mary and Joseph trusted and this trusting helped them to move from not understanding to not needing to understand. There have been many situations in my life that I did not understand, but with God’s help I find myself moving, no matter how slowly, toward not needing to understand.

NATIVITY

In a prayerful reflection on the Nativity we are spontaneously drawn to consider not just the newborn child, but also the others present in the Nativity scene: Mary, Joseph, the shepherds. Yet my consideration will not be focused on these “others”, but on the newborn child. We want to remain focused on God’s desire expressed at the transfiguration: *listen to Him, my beloved Son*. This newborn child is *He, God’s beloved Son* and he, rather than others present at the Nativity scene, will be the focus of my reflection.

Although God's gigantic step toward closeness, marking the beginning of the redemption event, is in itself most important, yet that reality remains hidden to human eyes until the child is born. At a moment, when the incarnate God cannot yet utter any words, we need to listen to this *deed*, which we will celebrate on Christmas day. Now Mary knows what the promised child looks like and, though not visually, we too can imagine what God-become-man looks like. As we use our experience of having seen other newborn babies, we realize how helpless he is: he, *through whom all things –visible and invisible– were made*.

Beyond the imagined visual impression, a thing that clearly impresses us is the remarkable set of limitations of God's taking human existence **there** and **then**. The baby's mission in the course of his earthly life is to witness for all of us how a human life can be lived according to God's desire. But that witnessing was significantly and unavoidably limited in several respects.

Chronologically, the duration of that witness was limited to those calendar years of his human life. He was not able to offer that witness in our century. As through baptism we share in Christ's mission, it is our privilege and duty to offer such witness in our 21st century.

Geographically, his human witness was limited to what today we call the Holy Land, with sporadic visits to pagan territory. Omaha did not even exist at that time. As baptized people, it is our privilege and also our duty to offer that witness where we live today.

Culturally, he offered his witness in a basically rural society without the scientific savvy of our culture. He spoke in the language of that culture and used parables and examples that echoed their life experience. It remains up to us to offer and express that witness in our own more sophisticated language to a people living in a highly technological society.

Politically, Jesus offered his witness in a non-democratic society dominated by an army of occupation and by a theocratic elite. He could not offer to us, citizens of a democratic nation, an example of how to discharge our civic responsibilities, as we endeavor to live according to God's desires. This kind of witness is and remains both our privilege and our personal responsibility.

Longevity-wise, he lived only some 33 years and could not offer his witness as a middle-age or elderly person. Today our life expectancy extends far beyond 33 years and this puts us in a position to offer Jesus' witness in a way he could not do himself, as persons older than some 33 years.

Socially, Jesus offered his witness as a single person and could not offer it as a married person. It is the privilege and challenge of married people to witness to how a life of marriage can be lived in Jesus' spirit.

Biologically, Jesus could be conceived only as a male or as a female human being. It is an historical fact that he was conceived and born as a man and this excluded the possibility of offering his witness as a female person. It is the very valuable privilege of you women to offer the witness of how a human life can be lived with Christ's attitude as a human person endowed with female biology and feminine personality. We men are simply not in a position to do that. We do not have your privilege or that responsibility.

It is important that we listen to this *deed* of limited human existence of God-become-man, because it is part of God's desire for us to *listen to Him, my beloved Son*.

All this we can learn from considering prayerfully Christ's birth.

CONCLUSION

Given what we can learn from a prayerful consideration of the three stages of this beginning of the redemptive event, the question could arise in our minds: could this take place again? Certainly not in the sequence we have considered of Incarnation-Gestation-Nativity. But I believe it can happen in a reverse way.

When I accompany the dying in the local Hospice House, I often nudge them to look at their impending death as a *reverse Christmas*: not the Christmas, when God came to us, but the *reverse Christmas*, when we come to God. Fr. Ron Rolheiser, OMI wrote an excellent article presenting human death as a birth to a new, unlimited life. In his view, what we call earthly life is really a time of gestation toward that new life.

If we do consider earthly death as a *reverse Christmas*, then a person's time of approaching death can be seen as a *reverse Advent*, when we prepare ourselves for our *reverse Christmas*. So, this liturgical season of Advent can find an echo in our eventual experience of a *reverse Christmas* and, unless we die unexpectedly, also find an echo in our eventual *reverse Advent*.

Because the experience of a *reverse Christmas* keeps happening all the time and will eventually happen to each one of us, there is a sustained newness found in our liturgical season of Advent/Christmas, a newness that is implied in the title of these talks: **THE ALWAYS NEW**.

END OF SCOND TALK

time for individual prayerful reflection

CLOSURE PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for this opportunity to be renewed by prayer, as we once more enter *THE ALWAYS NEW* season of Advent.

Give us the grace to remain conscious of *the reason for the season*, to pray for the many caught in the frenzy of shopping, decorating and indulging in food and drink, the many for whom the celebration of your birth is only *the Holidays*.

Give us also the grace to desire to remain close to you, to remember that you *have not moved*. To remain aware that you do not need to come to us at Christmas, because you never left us and will remain with us *until the end of the age*.

Help us to live our lives completing your witness in the ways you were not able to do, because of the various limitations of your incarnation and birth. And to live in an attitude of *reverse Advent*, as we moved toward the time of our *reverse Christmas*.