Nov. 30 — First Sunday of Advent — "Getting There is Half the Fun"

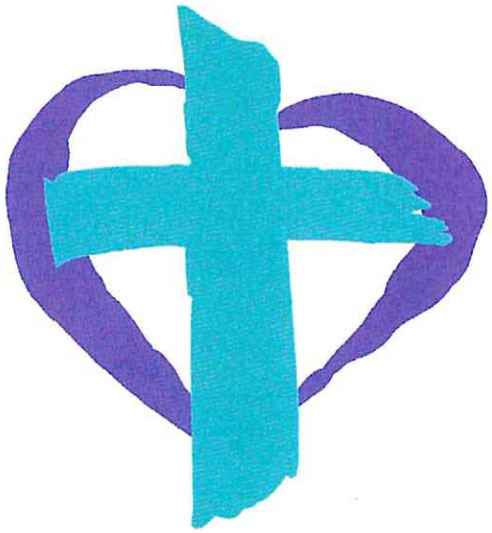


Advent is here again, and many families will be observing the journey toward Christmas with the old European tradition of the Advent Calendar, a banner with a scene, or a Christmas tree, with twenty-four pockets, each holding a small fabric figure that is taken out of its pocket on the appropriate day by one of the children and placed in the scene, or on the tree, until the final one — the Christmas Star — goes up on Christmas Eve. I cherish the memory of watching our own children, then our grandchildren, gathering excitedly at the end of each day as each of them in turn became the one to put up the next day's ornament. It not only marked our progress toward Christmas, but it made each day special in its own way, building expectation and reminding us all of what the season was all about.

Advent is, after all, meant to be a journey toward Christmas, a season in which each day has its own unique importance, a time when we recharge our spiritual batteries for the coming celebration. The problem in our hyper-charged culture, where television networks relentlessly start Christmas advertising before September and showing Christmas movies in July, is that Advent can become less like a journey where each day presents us with a new aspect of the Sacred Story to be savored, and more like a month-long "pre-Christmas," a broad-jump from one end to the other, in which we skip the "fly-over" days in between its beginning and end points, arriving at Christmas feeling like an exhausted traveler on a high-speed train roaring across a continent at 300 miles an hour, trying desperately to take photos out the window, and ending up only with blurred images.

This year I want to try to experience Advent like a pilgrim, sauntering along (*saunter*, from the French *Sainte Terre*, or holy ground) on the holy journey with senses keenly attuned to the sights, sounds and people that I encounter on the road, arriving at the end of each day's resting place to recall, to reflect on, and record any insights they may bring, hoping that, however large or small, they will gradually assemble into a mosaic that will become the gift I bring with me to the stable on Christmas morning. Why not try making your own Advent pilgrimage, pausing quietly for 5 or 10 minutes at the end of each day to give thanks for something or someone God has placed before you on the road to Christmas?

Second Sunday of Advent December 7 – "Faith is a Verb"



Today, we mark the beginning of the second week of Advent by lighting the second purple candle on the Advent wreath. The purple candle burning in the wreath this week is said to symbolize faith, though sometimes it's also called the candle of preparation.

This week I'll be praying for an increase of faith. Here is where things get a bit complicated, though. What exactly is this faith I'm supposed to be praying for? More than once I have heard someone say, "I wish I had your faith," as if faith were a thing that you had more or less of, like some kind of spiritual bank account that you could draw on or add to, a heavenly 401K that accumulates until it's time for heavenly retirement. (Are there some kinds of spiritual quarterly and annual reports that measure how my spiritual portfolio is performing? Do I have 8% more faith now than at this time a year ago, or have the stresses and strains of this year been draining my account? Would I ask if I have faith in my wife or my children — 8% more, or less — than I did at this time last year? Hopefully not, but I think the church unwittingly contributes to this quantitative mindset by using expressions like the "deposit of faith).

I suspect that when people think of having faith they more likely mean "Am I feeling faithful?" *Feeling* faithful and *being* faithful are different things entirely. Years ago my wife and I made a Marriage Encounter weekend, and one point they emphasized that has stayed with me ever since is that love is not a feeling, but a decision. I think faith — like love — is also not a feeling but a decision. I've begun to think of faith — like love — not as a noun, but as more like a verb. I may not always feel faith-filled, but I can always decide to be faithful. Like a muscle, faith needs to be exercised or it becomes flabby. During the Civil War, General George McClellan, the commander of the Army of the Potomac, built up a well-organized and well-trained fighting machine, but could never bring himself to take it into battle, so Lincoln eventually replaced him. A tool unused is useless; faith unexercised, is useless. It makes more sense to me to focus on faith not as something that I have, but something I do, so I've decided that what I'll be praying for in a special way this week is the courage to be faithful every day.

Dec. 14 — Third Sunday of Advent – "Are We There Yet?"



We are just past the halfway point in our Advent journey and I am finding the enthusiasm I had during the first two weeks ebbing and giving way to a restlessness. I'm feeling fidgety and a bit weary at times, mentally ticking off the days until we finally get to Christmas. I'm yearning for a change of scene, to metaphorically stretch my legs.

I'm sure this situation is familiar to any parent who has taken a trip with children. When our kids were young we would set out in the car to go somewhere, and it wouldn't be long before they would begin asking, "Are we there yet?" (On transatlantic flights, somewhere around hour four I always begin wondering the same thing.) It's a universal human response — excitement that shades into weariness and impatience as we wait to get to a destination that can seem so far away, like early settlers heading westward, glimpsing mountains in the distance that never seemed to get any closer.

I suspect that the ancient Hebrews wandering in the desert, heading for a promised land whose exact location they weren't sure of, may have asked Moses the same question. In retrospect, though, it's not really surprising. While there is a certain air of romance about pilgrimages, of course, they are not all sunshine, hymns and joy. Sometimes it rains, sometimes the sun beats down unmercifully, or there are bone-chilling winds. Sometimes the place where we pause, weary from the road, for a night's rest has bad food, or uncomfortable beds, or unpleasant neighbors. Sometimes we get blisters on our feet. That's just par for the course. Pilgrimages pass through all types of terrain.

More in keeping with the Advent season, I am also thinking of Mary and Joseph on the road to Bethlehem, Mary heavy with a child on the verge of being born, hot, tired and aching from the bone-jolting ride on a donkey, looking down the road and asking Joseph, "Are we there yet?" Or the Magi, on their own journey, following a star and a promise, believing, or hoping, that a new-born king awaits them at its end, wherever that might be. A pilgrimage without challenges would not be much of a pilgrimage, and that's what I'm trying to keep in mind as we come to third week of Advent and I find myself wondering, "Are we there yet?" Eleven more days and we'll be there, but almost as important as getting there is being attentive to what lies between here and there, because that is what prepares us for the wonder that awaits.

December 22 — Fourth Sunday of Advent – "I Wait"



One of my favorite movies is the charming film, "The Terminal." In it Tom Hanks plays Viktor Navorski, from the fictional Eastern European country Krakozia, who has just landed at Kennedy Airport to fulfill his father's last wish. His father, a great lover of jazz (like me), had collected the autographs of 56 of the 57 jazz greats in a famous 1958 photograph taken in Harlem, but passed away before being able to get the last autograph. Viktor has come to New York, carrying a coffee can containing the 57 autographs, to fulfill his promise to his father to travel to New York to obtain the final autograph, that of the great jazz saxophonist Benny Golson. Unfortunately, just after Viktor has entered the terminal he sees on a television monitor that a coup in Krakozia has led to the cancellation of all passports. Viktor, stranded in the international terminal, is in a no-man's land; he can neither enter the United States nor return home to Krakovia. He is at the mercy of a bureaucratic and unsympathetic airport administrator, for whom he represents nothing more than an administrative headache.

As the days stretch into weeks, then months, Viktor's reaction is remarkable: he manages to craft a life, finding ways to get food, creating a home in an area under construction at Gate 67, finding a job, and learning English, while evading the attempts of the airport administrator to induce him to leave the building so he can be arrested, becoming someone else's administrative problem. Viktor's goodness and industry gain him the admiration and friendship of many people working in shops and airport services. He develops a relationship with a flight attendant as they encounter each other during her layovers in the airport. Assuming he is also passing through for work, she asks, "What do you do?," and he answers, "I wait." She thinks he means his flight is delayed, but he is awaiting something more important: his eventual liberation. John Lennon wrote, "Life is what happens while you are busy making other plans," but I think of it slightly differently as "Life is what happens while you're waiting for life to happen." Through it all, Viktor never just waits passively for the future to unfold; he lives actively in the present, touching the lives of many people. He lives not in chronos time, but kairos.

With Christmas less than a week away, like Viktor I am trying to be actively patient, to cultivate in the midst of the chaos of the world around me an inner silence, listening, as the old carol puts it, "… in solemn stillness … to hear the angels sing," announcing once more the glorious story of Christ's coming to set us free. I wait.