

"A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. <sup>9</sup>No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. <sup>10</sup>And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

This time of year, I often turn to memories of my mother. My mother absolutely loved Christmas. Mind you, she cared little or nothing for the commercial life of Christmas but instead for the joy of worship and faith. My mother's sense of Christmas was shaped by her history; my mother was raised in poverty and lost most of her hearing as a child. As a result, when we heard Christmas music in our house it was loud; my father joked that the neighbors must surely have enjoyed it as well. My Mom loved Christmas jokes: "Why did the wisemen smell like smoke? Because they came from afar." Notably, my bishop from Oklahoma took a beat or two to get that one. But most of all, she loved the biblical stories. Not just the Gospel stories but all of them including the prophecies of Isaiah. As far as she was concerned, these were the stories that bore her up, the carried her spirit, that nourished her belief.

Christmas and its wonder were increasingly diminished in the last ten years of her life. Dementia crept in and seemed to slip away with her memories. At first, she joked about her memory loss but in time, even those jokes faded. I saw her right after her last Christmas, and she did not know who I was nor anyone else in my family. A Christmas miracle took place though on that occasion. A friend had joined me who knew little or nothing about my mother. Innocently, the friend started to ask my mother about her childhood Christmas. To my astonishment, my mother began to tell stories from her childhood. Enjoying a bowl of chocolate ice cream (her "favorite, favorite" as she was wont to say), she told a story of her life and past Christmases that was lucid, correct and intriguingly, held a spirit of hope. Christmas was a good memory and her joy was palpable.

I've read just lately of a new treatment for dementia that includes what my friend innocently initiated, telling life stories. The stories told by the patient organize the memory, help the person locate themselves in time and space and above all else, remind the storyteller of who they are and what they are for. My

mom was deeply satisfied by her Christmas story-telling experience and I found it to be a kind of miracle.

Kathy and I joke around our home about the season of Advent. You see, we form a mixed marriage—she's a protestant and I'm an Episcopalian. Somehow, with her patience, the marriage abides. I do admit to her that much of what comprises our Advent tradition could sound strange to an outsider. Why ever would the church start its calendar a month before the civil calendar? Why, with the increasing popularity of the bright commercialization of Christmas should the church insist on a season of reflection, memory and liturgical expectation?

Trust me, I understand this issue well—I was a parish clergy person once upon a time. I too suffered the objections that we wait until Christmas to sing carols, that we celebrate Christmas AFTER Christmas. Even among my family members, some of them start decorating November 1 only to take it all down by December 25<sup>th</sup>! I get it, and yet I'm here to say that Advent is as every bit important to the world as it is to us as Christians. I suppose this may feel like an overstatement but try it on if you will: the world has been suffering from a kind of dementia where it's forgotten who it is and what it is for. We, as Christians, and the world too, need stories that tell us who we are and what we can hope for.

If you listen well to the prophecies of Isaiah, you'll hear astonishing claims: only a humble person can truly lead, that the same person can suffer every kind of abuse and yet, and yet, become the one who leads us home. Startling things happen in Isaiah—lambs and lions lie down together, and children can crawl among venomous snakes. How can that be? How can Isaiah claim the truth of these images? Because Isaiah claims a history, more than a history, claims a story both truthful and hopeful. Isaiah tells a story, much as my mother did, by starting at the beginning and arcing forward towards hope. In a way, the end of the story shapes the beginning of the story just as the beginning shapes the ending. The truth is, when we arrive at the near end of Isaiah's story, a child will be born that embodies the humble leader. In that moment, our memory and hope will be confirmed, that one day we will find our way through the wilderness. As Isaiah writes, even the foolish cannot be lost.

Do you see why the world needs Advent just as much as we do? We need to start at the beginning and tell a story of hope and purpose, not just for the church but everyone. It matters in a hopeful way that our calendar starts a month earlier because we as the church are telling a hopeful story in the face of the world's forgetfulness. The world may have lost its way to climate change, poverty, hunger and the terrible abuse of women and children. I tell you truly, if the world in its forgetful state could have found a way to solve these problems, they already would

have been solved. But if we follow the story that begins with Isaiah, we already have the tools, simple tools, to solve these problems and many more. We only need practice what our God has called us to do, to love God and others more than ourselves. Do these things, and the world's memory will be restored, and we will be healed. If we follow a path that's self-serving, self-loving, we will stumble and fall. But if we follow the humble one, we will live.

My mom long ago delighted in asking me, "What's so extraordinary about the story of the Wise Men? It's the only time in recorded history that men have stopped and asked for directions!" We've arrived as Christians at that time of the year when we need to start and restart telling our story, again and again, until the world catches the hope. Until the world finds its direction. We were made for love, love of God and love of one another. Amen.

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