

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Among, With, Within

Luke 1

December 24, 2023

Greetings to you, my brothers and sisters, on this, the 4th Sunday of Advent/Christmas Eve. It's quite a day when we celebrate both in the same span of just a few hours.

I want to tell you about Alfred Delp. Alfred Delp is one of my Christmas heroes. But, in the faith, we should say saint instead of hero, so he's one of my Christmas saints. But, thinking about it further, everything that makes him a Christmas saint is really the profound way he lived out Advent. So, as we wait in the flickering light of the last hours of Advent, I think of Delp, an Advent saint: an Advent saint in no way that he could have ever wanted, but in every way that we still need.

Alfred Delp was a German Jesuit priest who was imprisoned, tortured, and eventually martyred in a Nazi death camp in 1945. Throughout the early 1940s, he was a gripping and dynamic preacher and one of the outspoken critics of the Nazi regime. He was a leader in the resistance, which is what got him imprisoned and martyred. While in prison, he secretly wrote meditations and devotions that were smuggled out and circulated as encouragement for fellow prisoners and even beyond the walls of the prison.

His tenure in the Nazi prison cell spanned the season of Advent and Christmas and so some of his most profound writing was centered on this season. He called it the Advent of the Heart and said, "The meaning of our Christian holy days is not primarily our external holiday celebrations, but that particular mysteries of God happen to us, and we respond. Something in the deepest center of our being is meant here, more than exterior symbols can even indicate." (*Advent of the Heart*, 133).

Father Delp, preaching in the dark shadow of the worst of the world's tyranny, taught that we need to celebrate holy days in three ways. Let us not miss something here first. Fr. Delp, in 1942, watching the Nazis sweep away the whole earth and restrict the celebrations of Christmas (138), teaches that we need to celebrate holy days. In the face of the world's great evil, he, like so many before him and after him, still does not lose faith. Celebration is also a kind of defiance when Christians celebrate the coming of the Messiah and his lordship over the world. Though his nation was overrun by Nazi fascists, though he watched as Christians all around him inexplicably turned to follow someone he cannot fathom should gain their support, even less their blind fidelity, even though he saw the horrendous things being done in the name of the nation and in the name of God, even though he himself suffered the loss of his pulpit and soon his life, he does not lose faith. An Advent saint holds his faith not just in nostalgic or even furtive ways, but openly, boldly, courageously, and hopefully celebrates the holy days when they come. You get the idea with everything swirling around him, his whole life is held together by the light of the Advent candle. When something in the deepest center of your being is

touched by God, you can go through anything. Anything is possible. Nothing is impossible with God.

We celebrate the holy days in three ways. First, by recalling a historical event. The Christmas feast is witness to the historical fact of the birth of Jesus Christ to a young woman named Mary of Nazareth. We are not celebrating the exaltation and the myth of some Greek god striding over the earth. Mary's ordinary body transformed, Mary's extraordinary faith, "Let it be according to your word", and even Mary's confusion and uncertainty in the midst of it all attest to the very real, very human-ness of the events of the birth of Jesus. We remember that, first of all. The circumstances of his birth are shrouded in tradition and myth, distanced from us by culture, and two thousand years of history, but he was born in the town of Bethlehem. That's the first way we celebrate the holy day: we remember the birth of Jesus and his mother who birthed him and God who came into this world.

This brings us to the second point. Within the historical event, a great mystery is hidden. "Something happens between Heaven and Earth that passes all understanding. This mystery is made present to us, continued in the world till the end of time, and is always in the process of happening—the abiding *mysterium* of God's coming" (133).

If there is any symbol of one who responds to the particular mysteries of God happening to them, it is Mary. She's the ultimate Advent and Christmas saint, of course. On the eve of Christmas, she is the one to whom a particular mystery of God happened, and she responded. Mary is the icon of the deepest center of our being encountering God. And so, because of her faithfulness and courage in the moment of annunciation, and the love and grace of God given to all the world through her, we come brothers and sisters, today to Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation.

We live from grace, not as miserable wretches but renewed in spirit. We are created with intrinsic dignity of the grace of the image of God of love. This is who you are. You are beloved. Before you are chromosomes and DNA, before you are a teeming mass of character traits and enneagram tendencies, before you are your personality or your formation, before you are bounced around by childhood experiences or adulthood challenges, you are beloved. You teem with beloved-ness. This is the grace of the world that flows in and through your veins. The Word took flesh and walked among us and walks with you and is within you. This is the mystery that all of life unfolds. What is the purpose of life but to grow in the grace that is your identity and that you share with all God's creatures? Everything else, everything else is just a part of this grace coming to life in your one, wild, ordinary, particular life. This is the mystery of Emmanuel—God with us.

In the annunciation, the angel gives 7 major pronouncements to Mary in a matter of minutes. Her life was being turned upside-down with news about her calling and the son who would be born to her. Each of the words spoken to her is richly, grandly layered with meaning from history. Understandably, Mary had questions.

In the end, it was the announcement that her cousin Elizabeth was also miraculously with child that convinced Mary to accept everything that was being told to her. Everything, as wild and uncertain as it is, is going to be ok. Everything changes when Mary knows she's not alone. Being companioned in our journey makes all the difference. And we are not alone. This is the mystery of the gift of Elizabeth to Mary and the incarnation to each of us. God is with us, together.

This mystery can be renewed in us on these high, holy days. It can also be renewed any day. Jesus promised I am with you always to the end of the age. He is with us. We are not alone. That means everything, and it changes everything of how we experience the trials and the tests of life.

So then, this is the third way we celebrate the holy day which "issues a challenge to each individual life, a message that demands a particular attitude and an interior decision from each person to whom it is proclaimed" (134). Living in these bodies and living in this world is serious business, and so the feast, even while joyful, is solemn and important.

We all well know that our tendency as Americans is to bury the celebration of Christmas under an avalanche of shopping and sentimentality. At their best, all that activity honors the delight of sharing the day with people we love. At its worst, all our activity smothers it. Most days, I'm not sure which it is anymore in our culture. Is Christmas a solemn celebration of Christ or an excessive, anxiety-riddled smothering of Christ. Maybe most days, it could be both intertwined. But then, in the middle of a busy day, I hear a comment on NPR by an interviewer who is about as cosmopolitan and cultured as they come. An interview with a pop star about holiday songs featuring ditties like *Fat Man is Coming* and *Fairytale of New York*, but a conversation which surprisingly turns in the end to *O Holy Night*. Then, unexpectedly, at least to me, the interviewer says, "This is one of those songs that's just a beautiful song. The part that goes "fall on your knees"--some chord behind that part is kind of gripping"

And I remember. It is. The chord and the call:

"Fall on your knees,
O hear the angel voices!
O Night divine,
O Night when Christ was born."

Advent is a season of waiting, and waiting is good. But, children, I have good news. Today, the waiting is over. This year, time is compressed. We lit one more purple candle of Advent waiting this morning and return in just in a little while, tonight. We don't wait long before we return and the final candle, the center candle, the one you've been waiting for--the Christ candle flickers to life, and all of our candles join with it. It is the holy night. The light of the world is coming. Advent's waiting and darkness and lament for the way the world is has reminded us why Jesus was born in the first place, and it starts the journey in which we determine why we are here at all. The waiting of Advent when entered with open hearts helps us to be more attentive to our own need for God and the world's need for God, way back then in Bethlehem, and now, today, even in Bethlehem. The whole world, including today's Bethlehem, and our

own hearts and our lives, our prayer for Christmas isn't just historical reenactment; it is fall-on-our-knees desire for God to tear open the heavens and come down, or, come again to the Bethlehem of our hearts and be born in us that we may be born again. It is a prayer for the angels to sing from the heavens of peace on earth, and a prayer with words we hardly know how to craft for the families whose loved ones are still held hostage, and for those whose whole existence has been reduced to rubble if not made invisible to the world. It is to pray for the people for whom Christmas Eve is celebrated with uncommon courage. There are people who know what hope is, or they would just lay down and die.

Our fundamental station in life isn't one of certainty of how the present will shape into the future for ourselves as individuals or our families or the world, but it is that of waiting for the ultimate revelation of that which began on the Holy Night. Even on Christmas, the church has no time but Advent of waiting for the coming of Christ. And there are no saints who are not also Advent saints.

We come to Christmas Eve in the year 2023, and no other. The candles we light, we light in the darkness of this year—what that means to you and to the world—and the light that shines must shine hope and joy in this year and for this year and the days to come. The light that shines tonight and by God's grace, shines in you, is the sign of our prayers and our hope and the continuation of our confession: The light shines in the darkness and that darkness will not overcome it.

Amen.

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