

4th Sunday of Advent Reflection

Our Nancy Ring was to be our homilist this weekend, but is fighting a bit of bronchitis – so, in her place I’d like to share a story that was in the Boston Globe Magazine a few days ago.

The writer tells of a 46-year-old woman, sitting in the Denver airport, waiting impatiently for her flight. She glances up to see a young man in front of her, pointing at the suitcase blocking the chair next to her. “Why this chair?” she wonders, a bit annoyed - there were several open seats all around her – but she hesitantly moves her suitcase.

The young man sits and drops his duffle bag at his feet. “Where you headed?” he asks. “Home - for Christmas,” she replies.

He tells her that he has just come home from Afghanistan and is heading to Florida to surprise his mom. It’s been five years since he’s seen her. “What was he most looking forward to?” the woman asked. “A shower!” he said. He grinned when she asked if his mother would cook his favorite meal.

He goes on to say that it was almost harder to leave the war than to stay, leaving others behind - knowing they had to go back; but this might be his last chance to see his mother.

The woman notices how he keeps scanning the room nervously as he talks; how when he looks at her, his eyes keep no distance. He wants something from her, but at first she doesn’t know what.

He says it’s hard to stop scanning for danger. Just yesterday he was in the desert. Fellow soldiers – men under his command – had been blown into pieces around him; today he is in the airport, trying to fathom people being angry over flight delays or the rush for coffee. He does not know how to be here in this place....

The woman understands. One week before, her friend’s teenage son had died suddenly, and- being a mother herself – she felt so disorientated and distant from the everyday world around her. She tells the soldier about it. He breathes deeply and shows a small smile. In this brief conversation, the woman and the young man had made a sliver of connection. The woman writes:

“He’s seen the raw and unbearable. He knows what is real and what matters. He knew it was not the time of the flight or a latté. But, he did not know how to tell us. This is what he needed from me, I realized. It’s what we all need. He did not want the seat beside mine. *He wanted to sit with me.* He needed to feel safe and understood for a brief while between here and there.”

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My sisters and brothers:

... a young soldier finds an understanding “mom” to talk to in a busy airport...,

... in our Gospel today, Mary, a teenage, mother-to-be goes to be with an elderly cousin, also pregnant, and finds consolation and support.

In both these meetings, we see grace: love that enables one cousin to put aside her own plight to help the other cousin; ... compassion that enables a mom to provide a safe, understanding place for another mom’s son.

Sisters and brothers, during the Christmas days that are approaching, will have ample opportunities for similar ‘visitations’ with relatives, neighbors, friends, fellow workers, store clerks, etc. Some of these ‘visitations’ may be opportunities for us to connect with the Spirit of God present in the healing, comfort, and support that we can extend to one another in such moments. If we choose to be awake and present to the people with who we are connecting, graced moments are awaiting us during these upcoming Christmas days!

I’d invite us to reflect a bit during these final Advent days on the persons with who the Spirit may be inviting us to connect in person or by phone or email or card - maybe even those from who we feel estranged....

Whether bound by blood or spirit, in Mary’s child Jesus, the inexplicable love of God becomes real to us; the peace and justice of God become possible in our own ‘visitations’ and encounters during these upcoming Christmas days.

Amen!