

The Mystery of Grace

In the remote mountains of Greece, there once lived a monk who had desired all his life to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulcher: to walk three times around it, to kneel down and to return home a new person. Gradually over the years he had saved what money he could, begging in the nearby village, and, finally - near the end of his life - set aside enough to begin his trip. He opened the gates of the monastery and, staff in hand, set out with great anticipation on the way to Jerusalem.

But no sooner had he left the Cloister than he encountered a man in rags: sad and bent to the ground, picking herbs.

“Where are you going, Father?” the man asked.

“To the Holy Sepulcher, brother! By God’s grace, I shall walk three times around it, kneel... and return home a different person from what I am!”

“How much money do you have, Father?” inquired the man.

“30 pounds,” the Monk answered.

“Give me the 30 pounds,” said the beggar. “I have a wife and hungry children; give me the money, walk three times around me, then kneel down... and go back into your monastery.”

The monk thought for a moment, scratching the ground with his staff, then took the 30 pounds from his sack, gave the whole of it to the poor man, walked three times around him, knelt... and went back through the gates of his monastery.

He returned home new person having recognize that the beggar was Christ himself - *not* in some magical place, but right outside the monastery door... mysteriously close!

In abandoning his quest for the remote, the special, the somehow “magical,” the monk discovered a meaning far more profound in the ordinary experience close to home. All that he had given up came suddenly rushing back to him with a joy unforeseen...!

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Sisters and brothers, to be surprised by grace is a gift to be prized! To be surprised by grace is the gift of Advent! To be surprised by grace is at the heart of the spiritual journey!

What is ‘grace’? The spiritual writer Ann Lamott comes perhaps as close as anyone in describing it:

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For the old monk, the encounter with the poor beggar was a grace-experience: an experience of the Divine, a moment with Jesus... that changed him: he did return home a *new person!*

Brothers and sisters, the encounter with the beggar didn’t just happen. In order to connect with the beggar, the monk needed to be awake, alert, ...he needed to pay attention to the graced moment or he would have missed it. He could have been so focused and taken-up with the business of fulfilling his life’s dream, that he could have ignored the beggar, or dismissed the beggar, or become impatient with the beggar or been rude or mean to the beggar ... and his long journey to Jerusalem would ultimately have been in vain...

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In today's Advent Gospel from Mark, Jesus is telling us that we must be alert and awake to discern those moments, those occasions when an encounter with the Divine is imminent - a grace-moment - where the Divine meets us where we are... *but does not leave us there...!*

Sisters and brothers, this weekend marks the opening of a new Liturgical Year as we begin the Season of Advent: four weeks of preparation for the commemoration of the birth of the historical Jesus 2000 years ago, the ultimate coming of Jesus at the end of time, but, most importantly for us here and now, an opportunity to experience the birthing of Jesus anew in our hearts, in our relationships, in our families and communities, in the world...!

Just like that monk at the monastery doorstep, Jesus is with us - ready to have an encounter with us ... ready, like a potter to mold us, to transform us, into new persons; little by little to become the persons and people God has created us to be.... gracing us to let go of, to repent, to turn away from the stuff in our lives that is paralyzing us, blocking us from healing and love and compassion and life

The challenge for us these Advent days is to stay awake, to pay attention, to be alert: to recognize the Divine in the events and encounters on this Advent journey to Christmas.

It looks like we survived Black Friday (more or less...), but can we survive the social and cultural demands of the holiday season, that have the potential to ensnare us, so that - while physically present, with eyes wide open - we will be spiritually and emotionally and mentally absent, disconnected, unaware, asleep... and miss the beautiful encounters with the Divine (like the monk with the beggar) and wake up Christmas morning exhausted, stressed, worn-out and sort of wishing for the moment when the holidays are over... .

I'd like to share couple of suggestions - *not to add stress, guilt and pressure to our commitments and responsibilities* - but perhaps some little ways we can transform the quality of these Advent and Christmas Days that God gives us:

#1: Spend some time at the beginning of each day, maybe light a candle in the darkness with your first cup of coffee and, rehearsing the events of the day to come, asking God for the grace to be awake and alert to recognize the Divine Presence in the events of the day; or, do a little reflecting while you are in the shower, or on the drive to work, turn off the radio and the phone and spend the time in quiet reflection, or, when the little ones are napping take some moments, with a cup of tea at the window, to reflect... .

#2: Remember: we do have choices! As an alternative to the “shop till we drop” mantra, we can choose to join a small faith-sharing group meeting during these weeks before Christmas, reflecting and sharing with others about how we can stay awake in the midst of all the commercial hype; or perhaps: attend one of the Advent evening concerts or presentations or a play, rather than sit in front of the TV or visit the mall... .

#3: We might have a discussion with our partners, friends, and family about how we might improve the quality of the holidays rather than getting sucked into the “more is better” mentality....

#4: At the end of each day, we can follow the Ignatian practice of the Examen - perhaps again with a lighted candle and a cup of tea we can reflect on the day, noticing where we experienced God’s presence, from small moments, like feeling the sun on our face, to the deeper moments like: when did we love? When were we loved? We can get in touch too with some of the negative things we did during the day - expressing our sorrow and asking forgiveness; and at the close of our reflection, asking for God’s grace to do better during the following day... .

#5: Finally - as a Parish Community - we can pray for one another and support one another in making these Advent and Christmas days enriching and healing for us all, especially those who find the days overly stressful, or lonely, or empty... .

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but does not leave us where it found us.”*

Amen!