

Putting the *vent* back in *Advent*

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Advent is upon us, and I'm just not feeling it this year. Granted, it is only the first week, but I'm not sure I can muster up all the mystery and purple and candles again this year.

On Sunday I heard myself say in my sermon something about making our hearts ready to receive the Christ Child this season. I said it as I have said it every Advent for the last 21 years. And later while I was doing the dishes I realized that I haven't the foggiest idea what I mean by that.

Every liturgical season has its church-speak. Some of my favorites: Transfiguration, when he was "changed from glory into glory." Easter as we leave the cross and face the beauty of the empty tomb. Pentecost, when God set our hearts on fire. Lent, as we make our way to Calvary/Golgotha/the cross. And Advent, when we prepare our hearts to receive the Little Lord Jesus.

Little Lord Jesus makes me think of Little Lord Fauntleroy which I'm pretty sure is not an incarnation of anything divine; Jesus in satin knickers, a ruffly pirate blouse, and pilgrim shoes with buckles. I do not want to make my heart ready for that.

Now I can be as awestruck as the next person by a baby. I love to think deeply about the theology of the incarnation, the foolishness of God who chose to take on human flesh. But making my heart ready for baby Jesus? Or really, making my heart ready for anything? What the hell does that mean? It probably means I shouldn't use the word *hell*.

Does it mean I'm supposed to be nicer to people this season? Does it mean I'm supposed to be very generous? Does it mean I should confess all my sins? (As if there were time for that in this busy season.) Does it mean I rid myself of impure thoughts? Does it mean I wake at 4 every morning to meditate on Christ? Does it mean I look for ways to tell people about the good news?

The problem is that my heart is unreachable. It's not that I don't feel; it's not that I don't respond emotionally to the sorrows of the world. It's not some things don't hit me in the gut because they do. It's that the heart as a metaphor isn't working for me right now. Maybe it's cardiac overload. Maybe it was the cheesy Christmas carols I heard while in the dentist chair yesterday having my teeth cleaned.

I know how to get my house ready for Christmas: move the desk, put up the tree and lights, figure out where to put the Christmas and holiday cards that come in. I know how to get the church ready for Advent: know who is leading worship when and figure out the logistics of the candles lighting and blanket brigade. Write the candle liturgy. Thank the volunteers. Pick the right balance of Advent and Christmas hymns. Be sensitive to those who are having a hard time because it's Christmas. Wear purple on Sunday, red for parties.

But I don't know how to get my heart ready for Jesus. So I'm not going to worry about it anymore.

Instead, this year, I think I'll make my hands ready for incarnation. They will be ready to type words that are as true as I can make them, about God and this weird life we're called to. They will be ready to hold the hand of the woman whose Christmas is her first as a widow. They will be ready to wrap presents for the family whose name we pick in our giving program. They will be ready to chop and dice and stir the soup I'll make for the volunteer thank-you lunch. They will take up the green pen to address the Christmas cards, and they will wrap about my sweet girl on Christmas morning when she gets up early, excited because it's Christmas, excited because it's a day we have together as a family and no one has to be at work.

You get your hearts ready, and I'll get my hands ready, and if we don't, Jesus will come anyway.

Whatever that means.

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