The two faces of Advent: John 1:6-8, 19-28

John stands on the frontier as the ages collide, destined to bear the impact.

by Fleming Rutledge in the December 1, 1999 issue

Who among us would tolerate John the Baptist for even a few minutes? I understand that there is a medallion called "Laughing Jesus" being handed around. We will wait a long time for an image of "Laughing John the Baptist." John is the principal personage of Advent, with two whole Sundays focused on his preaching, yet there is nothing in his message to correspond to the well-loved "Peace on earth." John is not wishing us goodwill; he is calling down judgment upon our heads.

In 1968 the Catholic Interracial Council of the Twin Cities produced a remarkable Christmas card. The outside of the card was red-orange, and featured the words of the Benedictus: "From on high our God will bring the rising Sun . . ." Then you opened the card to find a stark black-and-white photograph of a small African-American child caught by a ray of sunlight as he sits listlessly in the shadows of a slum courtyard. Along with the photo was the rest of the verse: "to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death." The contrast between the outside and the inside caused heads to snap back. My husband and I still think it is the best Christmas card we ever received.

In 1969 the card had some words of John the Baptist on the front, in red: "There is One among you . . ." Opening the card, one saw another black-and-white photograph, this time of a young Vietnamese girl with the blank, stunned expression of a child in wartime, and the rest of the verse: " . . . whom you do not recognize." Propaganda? Dubious Christology? Politically heavy-handed? Maybe. But the Baptizer lends himself to messages of startling currency.

Advent has two faces. One is apparent in the first lines of Advent hymns: "Hark, a thrilling voice is sounding!" "Sleepers, wake! a voice astounds us!" This is the Advent mood of rapturous expectation as the time of fulfillment moves toward us.

The other face is that of John the messianic herald who stands on the frontier as the ages collide, destined to bear the impact. This face of Advent is that of the apocalyptic woes, the tribulation that overtakes all who stand their ground as the Age to Come pushes against "the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away" (1 Cor. 2:6).

John flings his accusation against the religious leaders: "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" This is almost always read aloud with the emphasis on "you," because that enables us to distance ourselves from the "you" as though we ourselves were not being addressed. Rather, the emphasis should be divided between "flee" and "wrath to come," so as to indicate the gravity of the coming judgment upon the godly and ungodly alike.

John himself stood under this sentence of wrath. He did not flinch from his vocation, even though the strange mission of this Messiah was hidden from him. We think that John was expecting the Avenger. He did not yet know that the Vindicator would take the place of those who stood under judgment and in the shadow of death. Yet he held the piece of ground that had been prepared for him and now appears together with Mary at the side of the exalted Christ. Combined in John is the paradox of Advent: the coming triumph of God manifest precisely in the darkness of this present evil age (Gal. 1:4).

As we make our choices about what to emphasize in Advent, we might reflect on our cultural situation. A rising chorus of voices identifies irony as the prevailing posture in our post-Seinfeldian times. Andrew Delbanco writes that the prediction of Jonathan Edwards has come true, that it is no longer clear that anyone is to be blamed or condemned for anything. This is ironic, because even as we congratulate ourselves on having subverted bourgeois values, we have somehow managed to enshrine them. A culture that can exhibit sliced cows in formaldehyde and the work of a sentimental illustrator like Norman Rockwell in a major museum at the same time, with no sense of absurdity, can hardly boast of a refined sense of irony.

Given the choice between sentimentality and irony, let's go back to John the Baptist. Christianity is under attack from every quarter—not least from within its own ranks as we become more and more indistinguishable from everybody else—but the commanding voice of the prophets and apostles can lift us out of the culture wars onto a plane that not even the most cynical Jesus-basher can successfully besiege.

Advent has two aspects. The Advent critique of sentimentality is manifest in a refusal to let Christmas come too soon. Flannery O'Connor defined sentimentality as skipping lightly over the fall into "an early arrival at a mock state of innocence." As for irony, there is one thing that will speak to it, and that is personal witness at great cost. Bishop Basilio do Nascimento of East Timor is an Advent witness. He never left the country even at the height of the reign of terror. Christians like him have in one sense already "come through the great tribulation" (Rev. 7:14).

As for nonsentimental, transironic Christmas cards, the Interracial Council started making cards with smiling, beautiful white and black people celebrating peace. As far as I know, it was not heard from again. Advent, however, remains, with its paradoxical combination of waiting and hastening, suffering and joy, judgment and deliverance, apocalyptic woe and eschatological hope. It is the combination that counts. This is the way Christians live now, for "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never mastered it" (REB).