

Advent despair

By [Debra Dean Murphy](#)

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In 1595, the English Jesuit Robert Southwell wrote [“The Burning Babe,”](#) a startling, unsettling poem about the incarnation—which means, given Southwell’s rich theological imagination and deep Catholic piety, that it is also a poem about suffering and salvation. And about the human predilection to resist divine love.

Three hundred seventy-one years later, Denise Levertov penned [“Advent 1966,”](#) in which her vision of the “Burning Babe” is not Southwell’s blessed Infant “scorched with excessive heat” (though her poem is replete with references to Southwell) but dying babies in Vietnam—“infant after infant” . . . “flesh on fire” . . . “moaning and stinking in hospitals three abed.”

Forty-seven years after Levertov’s startling, unsettling poem, its indictment of the human predilection for violence is as timely as ever. Napalm has long been superseded in modern warfare, most recently by the surgical precision of drone strikes, but the [incinerated dead](#) are just as dead.

Some say poetry as raw political commentary is a bad idea. Indeed, Levertov’s friend and longtime correspondent, poet [Robert Duncan](#), excoriated her political turn, insisting that the poet’s job is “not to oppose evil but to imagine it.” Yet Levertov’s work in the Vietnam era was as much personal as political. In “Advent 1966,” the subtext is the speaker’s vision—the increasing lack and loss of it: “There is a cataract filming over my inner eyes.”

This is the poetry of conviction, of wrestling with human failure and frailty in ways large and small. It is the poetry of despair—a refusal to make a leap toward hope that would put a tidy finish on the senseless and catastrophic.

It is fitting that Levertov locates her outrage, personally and politically, in Advent—whether or not something particular in December of 1966 occasioned the poem. In Advent, we are mindful of despair—in parts of the story that shape our Christian convictions and also in our own lives on these long, dark days when the senseless and catastrophic sometimes overtake us.

Writer and Anglican priest [Fleming Rutledge points out](#) that "a famous painting of the annunciation in the Cloisters in New York shows the embryonic Jesus slipping down a shaft of sunlight toward Mary—and he is already [carrying his cross](#)." The incarnation—the feast of Nicene dogma, as Rutledge notes—is of a piece with a suffering Christ, a suffering world, a suffering you and me.

In Advent we live with that startling, unsettling truth, refusing to rush toward a tidy finish.

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