

The body we await and the body we are

Like Simeon and Anna, I had a rough Advent.

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The other day, a small group from my church joined others from our neighborhood in a march on Chicago's north side. As we swarmed the streets, temporarily shutting down traffic, I noticed a woman in a car. Some motorists were exasperated, trying to turn around or just glowering at us. Others were supportive, honking their horns to the rhythm of "Siyahamba" as we sang. But this woman did nothing but sit there, parked in the middle of the procession, and wipe tears from her eyes. With visible emotion, she registered shock at this small but mighty band of the faithful marching with a processional cross at our head, proclaiming that black lives matter.

While the crowd's emotion was jubilant and righteous, I couldn't help but feel sad. Broken. Young as I am, I felt like the world had rooted all the idealism out of me. And in the midst of Advent, with Christmas carols on people's lips and culturally enforced good cheer on every street corner, the disconnect was too much. Buy a television, ignore the pain. The Senate torture report is out, but pay no heed: here's another Facebook post with a cat dressed like Santa. It's two years since the Newtown shootings, and our church is having to have careful discussions about the message we send to the community by posting—or not posting—an ugly but state-mandated sign declaring the church a weapon-free zone, as if the promise that God will beat our swords into plowshares were not enough.

According to Luke's account, Simeon and Anna have had a similarly brutal Advent. They have lived long under Roman oppression. Perhaps he has been forced to carry a burden a mile for a Roman soldier. Maybe she's witnessed the insult of an idol placed near the Temple. Both have certainly watched helplessly as the Herodians, with the full support of Roman authority, round up those who are insufficiently deferential to pack them into jails or worse. Simeon has been told that before he dies, a child will appear before him as the Messiah. Anna is praying for redemption

night and day. Both are getting on in years, and perhaps both are wondering if they will go to their graves without seeing the promised one.

And then, into this Advent of dwindling hope, a boy is brought into the Temple.

I don't know what light dawns on Simeon to tell him who this child is, but something draws him. And Anna follows close behind, her breath catching in her throat at what she sees. I imagine tears falling down Simeon's craggy cheeks as his hopes are realized and he cradles the sacred child at last in his arms. With joy wrapped in heavy emotion, he gasps out his blessing—a warning—and gives thanks that now he can depart, at last, in peace. And Anna, similarly moved, her face moistened with the emotion of sudden, unexpectedly fulfilled hope, blesses the boy and raises thanks to God on high.

I don't know why exactly the woman in that car was crying, but I could tell it was our witness that moved her. And I do know that as the church awaits the coming of Christ in the form of a child, we also *are* the body of Christ. Perhaps this woman, like Simeon and Anna, has been waiting many years for a sign that the body of Christ is alive in the world. Maybe she wanted to see that the salvation God has promised is more than dead words on a page, that it's alive in the feet and the mouths of those who claim to believe in this revelation to the nations.

As I walk through this brutal Advent, as I prepare myself to welcome into my own hardened and hurting heart the child who will redeem my soul and transform my will, I cannot forget this woman. We're told time and time again that Advent is a time of preparation, of waiting, of hoping, of yearning. But she reminded me of what we are preparing *for*, of the ends to which our hope is directed.

We are preparing to do more than simply welcome the body of Christ. We are purifying ourselves that we might actually *be* that body, incarnate and active.

The world needs to see in us this message: that Christ wins the ultimate battle not with a sword, but with sacrifice. Christ does not "stand his ground" or come to the cross with a concealed carry permit. Christ does not torture anyone to obtain actionable intelligence on when the Roman soldiers will arrive at Gethsemane. Christ faces down not an unarmed black body but the fully armed and brutal might of a police state, and not once does Christ fire a shot in self-defense. If we prepare ourselves to carry that crucifixion in the world, we are saying that the resurrection condemns all crucifixions forever.

Simeon and Anna are still in the world, waiting to see the body of Christ before their time is up. Maybe we can be the ones who show it to them.