

The Season of Advent by Fr. Michael Seavey

Tommy Lasorda was manager for the Los Angeles Dodgers for well over twenty years during the 1970s through 1990s. He is a devout Catholic and once related a story of his faith and baseball. The Dodgers were in Cincinnati for a three-game weekend series against the Reds. Tom rose early Sunday morning to attend the earliest Mass he could find allowing him to get to the ballpark. He happened to attend the same Mass as John McNamara attended, then the manager of the Reds.

He thought how wonderful that later that afternoon their ball teams would square off against each other, but for this hour, both managers worshipped God together. As Mass ended, Tommy noticed John stop by a small side altar to the Blessed Mother. He lit a candle and knelt in prayer. Tommy expressed how impressed he was with John's faith and devotion and so as the church emptied out, he too visited the side altar and knelt in prayer.

He was asked by the interviewer, "Did you light a candle too?" "No," Tommy responded, "I blew his out and we won 3-2." The story becomes a nice segue to entering the beauty of Advent.

The Advent season is one of the best kept secrets of the Catholic Church. It is rich in imagery and spiritual renewal and not simply a countdown to Christmas. Advent offers its own spirituality attention related to Christmas but also distinct.

There are some things that I have learned over the years never to include in Advent preaching. I try never to tell people that we should all be less busy, then we know we are going to be busier. So why issue a futile call for you and me? I try not to tell people that we should do less shopping and partying. Again such is futile. I could preach to do less partying and socializing, but we will do so anyway. And you will still have parties and then not invite me because of what was preached!

What I instead tell people is not to be less busy---but to put more humanity into our busyness. The task is not to be less busy (that is impossible) but to put more humanity into our busyness.

Because this is more challenging also makes it more of an opportunity. The readings for this First Sunday of Advent encourage us to uncover the grace of everyday life. The Gospel offers examples of everyday life: farming, grinding grain, sharing meals, marrying. One is taken and one is left. What is the difference of one staying and one swept away?

When you are shopping and standing in a long line of people at the checkout, consider the collective stories of the people in front of you. How many celebrate great blessings in their life: recent marriages, births, new jobs or promotions? How many are bearing crosses to the best of their ability: marriage difficulties, health concerns, raising children alone, financial stresses, a recent loss of loved one? Consider these possible stories and then simply silently pray to God for all those standing in line with you.

Pray for the cashier. She or he has put up with everyone's attitude for good or bad for several hours and not for a significant paycheck. Every cashier has his or her own stories of blessings and crosses as well. If we start with that, the standing in line

might not seem as frustrating or maddening. By praying for others, you have put more humanity into the whole line of customers including and especially yourself.

Is there a grace to be discovered on the cluttered roads and busy highways? Are there opportunities to find more patience, kindness, and understanding with other drivers? Can driving and roadways become more human? Can we give someone a break or not be so quick to find the horn when someone cuts us off, as though it is something we have never done to anyone else? “By the way, I am talking about all of you right now, and certainly not me. If you all drove better, I would be less frustrated on the road.” Does this sound familiar?

What about our faith? Does Catholicism take us away or are do we feel left behind? Does Catholicism give us a motivation and compelling reason to live life, or is it just one more thing to do? Is Catholicism simply a collection of rules, a church of burdens and regulations or is it an encounter with the living God that is freeing, liberating, and a love that is overwhelmingly and overpowering? Is Catholicism for us reduced to simply a religion or is it the experienced of faith?

Perhaps then we might experience the ones in the gospel that are swept away with faith. You might be doing the exact same thing as the person beside you but approach it from the entirely different vantage point of faith. More connected to the discovery of grace in everyday life, your heart will be freer and more the person God created you to be.

The prophet Isaiah images the nations coming to God’s mountain beating their swords into plowshares. Their weapons of war become farming tools of creation and peace. We might not be able to affect much of what happens on the world stage, but are there swords in our own hearts that might be beaten into plowshares of forgiveness? Are there grudges that can be ground down into some compassion and peace?

The Advent season. The path to becoming divine is to be found on the path to becoming truly human. Because St. John’s Gospel will proclaim on Christmas morning Mass, the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” the more human we become, the more divine we become. The more we truly become the person God created us to be, the more we share in the very divine nature of God.

The path to true humanity is found only in our relationships: our relationship to God, to each other, and to our very self. There is no salvation without being in relationship, and no superficial relationship will ever lead us to God. You as God’s People continue to teach that every day. You pour yourselves out in your relationships: marriages, parenting, caring for elderly relatives, your parish and your work. There is nothing superficial, and everything sacred and holy. Like Isaiah’s image of climbing God’s mountain, Advent reminds us to keep our attention focused on the destination, and to pay attention to what is before us in daily life.

In Pope Francis’ encyclical *The Light of Faith*, he writes “There is an urgent need...to see...that faith is a light, for once the flame of faith dies out, all other lights begin to dim... A light this powerful... must come from God. Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love... Transformed by this love, we gain fresh vision, new eyes to see; we realize that it contains a great promise of fulfilment,

and that a vision of the future opens up before us. Faith... becomes a light for our way, guiding our journey through time.”

St. Paul writes to the Romans, “It is now time for you to awaken from sleep.”

If Advent can help us to keep focused on the future but to uncover the grace of the present moment, we will reach Christmas with a deep awakening. We can fix our sight on the future with hope, recognize the present moment of grace with faith, and serve generously with love.