

It's that time of year when families trudge to the mall to have their picture taken with Santa Claus for the family annual Christmas letter. Here's John Ortberg's take on his experience. "Nancy and I took our 3 then preschoolers to get the family picture. I don't know who invented this tradition, but whoever did should be put away for a long long time. All 3 children were terrified of the experience and did not like the strange man in the red suit. All were crying and upset. I went through a series of stages. The first was naïve optimism. "Come on kids, this will be fun." That was a short stage.

The second was bribery. "There's a Mrs. Field's cookie shop in the mall. If you will smile nicely, we will take you there for cookies." That didn't last much longer.

Bribery gave way to the threat stage. "You kids want to cry – I'll give you something to cry about." This is not a good smile inducer for preschoolers. By this time, children in other people's families were crying in the line just looking at my family. I was embarrassed. I pulled Mallory aside because she was the most upset of our 3 children. "Mallory, you're pretty sad, huh?" Big tears. Big nod.

"Mallory, I bet I know what you want right now. I bet more than anything else, you'd like to have Baby Tweezers." Baby Tweezers was Mallory's first and most favorite doll. Mallory named her all by herself. Baby Tweezers. We've never figured out why. Mallory was not a forceps delivery child. But she nodded again – that's what she wanted. "Well, Mallory," I said, "if you ever want to see Baby Tweezers alive again..." (WHEN THE GAME IS OVER, IT ALL GOES BACK IN THE BOX, page not cited) (Sing) IT'S THE MOST DYSFUNCTIONAL TIME OF THE YEAR!

We think of Advent primarily in terms of Christmas, as an anticipation of Christmas, which is Christ's first coming into the world. OK, but when we do, perhaps we can learn something from our kids. They are happy and excited because Santa Claus is coming. But the Church reminds us that JESUS is coming. So why aren't we as happy about His coming as our kids are about Santa Claus coming?

Santa Claus only comes from the North Pole, but Jesus comes from heaven.

Santa Claus only comes with 8 flying reindeer, but Jesus comes with legions of angels.

Santa Claus comes for kids, but Jesus comes for everybody.

Santa Claus comes down the chimney and into our living room, but Jesus comes down our faith and into our living.

Santa Claus' gifts are earthly toys, but Jesus' gifts are heavenly joys.

Santa Claus' gifts last for a few months or years, Jesus' gifts last for eternity.

Santa Claus doesn't take us back up to his home at the North Pole, but Jesus takes us back up to His home in heaven.

So why aren't we more happy about Jesus coming than our kids are about Santa Claus coming? Is it because we're so much smarter than our kids? Or is it because we're stupider? (from Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, p. 3)

So we begin with this beautiful passage from Isaiah, who has been called 'the Shakespeare of the prophets.' He is a poet and a visionary, and this passage gives us one of his visions, sent by God. He was not

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dreaming or making this up. He was 'seeing things,' but those things were real. They were the real future. What he saw was a whole world of saints, from all the nations in the world, together worshipping the same God, the true God, in great joy that demanded exclamation points. It was also a world without war. In the continuation of this vision, which we will read in next Sunday's Mass, there is not even war among the animals. Lambs and lions lie down with each other.

But this sounds nothing like our world. Far from it. This is a vision of the world AFTER Christ's second coming. But it will happen just as truly as His first coming, His first advent, the first Christmas, really happened. Both advents were future to the prophet Isaiah. To us, one is past and the other is future. But that future is not merely an ideal, a human dream. It is even better than Martin Luther King's famous, beautiful "I HAVE A DREAM" speech. It is a divine promise, a guarantee.

Meanwhile, BETWEEN His first coming and His second coming, what did Jesus leave us in this world, besides a world full of wars and tragedies and cancers and divorces and terrorists? What did He give us? He gave us God. He gave us Himself. He left us His Church, His Mystical Body, which is the only place in this world where we have His real, personal presence in the Eucharist, all of Him, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity. And He left us His Holy Spirit, who can also be called the Holy Ghost because He haunts our souls with holiness, the holiness that is the key to happiness.

Santa Claus makes our kids happy even though he only visits our house for a few minutes on Christmas Eve; the Holy Spirit makes us deeply happy because He's real and He lives in our souls forever. And the gifts of the Spirit are better than toys: love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Would we rather have that, or a partridge in a pear tree? (IBID, p. 4-5)

Second, so what do we DO with Advent? Although the thought of the final coming can sound a bit frightening, as disciples of Christ we are never meant to operate in fear. It's not our job to speculate or to wait passively. Instead, as verse 42 of our Gospel reads, "Therefore stay awake, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come."

And here we have come to the heart of the matter. It is very easy for us to go through life like robots on an assembly line. Learning to live consciously, to see what we see and to hear what we hear, to see and hear as Christ did, coaxes our souls into the fullness of our humanity, and this is the deep soul work of discipleship. (help/idea from Joan Chittister, THE ART OF LIFE – MONASTIC WISDOM FOR EVERY DAY, p. 30)

The big challenge of life is trying to stay awake – to all that it means – to all that God is trying to say to us – and to all the depths of our ordinary, extraordinary, work-a-day miracle-stuffed lives. Life tends to lull us to sleep, just moving from one thing to the next. We can sort of sleep walk through life for many years. Our awakening may hide in our attic for years, waiting until we raise our children or finish our career. But someday it will appear, to break down the gate and say, "ready or not, here I am." Advent is an annual reminder of this – and our annual invitation to wake up again if we have become somewhat drowsy in our faith-lives.

To be fully alive is an openness to mystery. The clues to our real nature are always around us. When our mind opens, our body changes, or our heart is touched, and all the elements of the spiritual life are revealed. Great questioning, unexpected suffering, original innocence – any of these can require us to open beyond our daily routine, to 'step out of the bureaucracy of ego,' as one Tibetan teacher has counseled (Chogyam Trungpa). Every day brings its own calls back to the spirit, some small, some large, some surprising, some ordinary. (adapted from Jack Kornfield, AFTER THE ECSTASY, THE LAUNDRY, p. 20-21)

What is right in front of us, we see least. We take the plants in the room for granted. We pay no attention to the coming of night. We miss the look of invitation on a neighbor's face. We see only ourselves in action and miss the cocoon around us. As a result, we run the risk of coming out of every situation with no more than when we went into it. Advent says STAY AWAKE! Don't miss the coming of Christ into every moment, every minute of our lives.

We need to relearn to notice the obvious, the colors that touch our souls, the shapes that vie for our attention, the looks on the faces of those who stand before us blurred by familiarity, blank with anonymity – the context in which we find our overly distracted lives. And this is the beginning of contemplation, of true prayer. “Oh, wonder of wonders” the Sufi master says, “I chop wood. I draw water from the well.” I live in the present, in other words. I know what is, is the presence of God for me. “The first step of humility is to ‘keep the reverence of God always before our eyes and never forget it,’” St. Benedict says in His Rule.

Everything in life is speaking to us of something. And that something is God. Advent is a daily, minute-to-minute reality. God is always with us, always coming to us. Always present to us. But we need to be awakened – or re-awakened to this again and again as we go through our busy lives. We need to see the holiness in taxi-ing kids to soccer and band and plays; the goodness of our work, even when it is tedious or dull, the holiness of our kitchens and bedrooms, even when the meals are basic and the marital life nothing like the movies.

It is the ordinary, daily, unveiling of the comings of God in our midst. The question is not so much what is going on – but what is happening to us because of it? What do we see here of God that I could not see otherwise? What is God asking of our heart as a result of each event, each situation, each person in our life? Etty Hillesum, a Jewish prisoner in one of Hitler's concentration camps, saw the goodness in her German guards. That is contemplation, that is the willingness to see as God sees. This does not change the difficult, the boredom, the insidious character of a situation, perhaps, but it can change the texture of our hearts, the quality of our responses, the depth of our understandings. Without being awake, enemies stay forever only enemies and life is forever bland, and the prospect of another Christmas is just an annual hop onto an endless, high speeding treadmill.

It takes a lifetime to really understand that God is in what is standing in front of us. Most of life we spend looking, straining to see the God in our midst, behind the cloud, beyond the dark. It is when we face God in one another, in creation, in the moment, that the real spiritual journey begins, and a true Advent finally unfolds.

Everything in life is meant to stretch us beyond our superficial self to our better self, to the Ultimate Good who is God. And for that to happen, we must ask of everything in life: What is this saying to me about life? Why? Because when we cease to look deeply at all the parts of our lives, our souls are already dead. To be fully awake – to truly live Advent – we must ask always, of everything: What is there in this of God for me? Where do I see God coming in this? Amen. (last section adapted from Joan Chittister, ILLUMINATED LIFE: MONASTIC WISDOM FOR SEEKERS OF LIGHT, p. 22-24)