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Deserts die at the oasis: Resisting resignation

Making Preparations



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The theme of our Advent series is: Deserts die at the oasis. If the first task of Advent is to keep the great watch, to keep our eyes open and our hearts attuned to the oases of grace and mystery, then the second task is preparation. No one goes into the desert unprepared and comes out alive on the other side. You prepare by making sure you not only keep your eyes open for the oases, but that you have what it takes to draw water from these oases and that you have what is needed to take that water along in order to bridge the desert spans between the oases.

The stories of God placed before us on this Second Sunday of Advent are filled with images of preparation. We find Jerusalem throwing off the garments of sorrow in preparation for the coming of her Lord. There is talk of preparing the way of the Lord and preparing for the day of Christ. In every case there is the ideal of preparation in order to be ready for the critical moment when we come upon the oasis, the encounter with God. The power and the challenge of these passages should not be lost on us.

After all, preparation is not a stranger to us. It is highly valued in most areas of our society. In business circles none are more respected than those who are prepared for every eventuality the markets can throw at them. There is a strong desire

and drive to be prepared for every deal and all transactions. Politicians of all stripes promise to keep us prepared for every emergency the nation might face. In education we prize preparation and insist on it for our children and the good of the society and the nation. There is nothing but admiration for athletes who prepare and are ready for all aspects of their sport. We stand in awe of great musicians precisely because they not only prepare for their concerts, but they never stop preparing and practising for the sake of their art.

In other words, we value preparation. Yet, we do not value it uniformly throughout our lives. There are places where we adopt a very lax attitude towards preparation, often when it comes to the places of our interiority, our soul, our heart, our spiritual life. When Advent finds the places of human life where we do not prepare, or at least not very much, it shows us that these are the places which we do not value very highly. These are also often the places where our resignation is strongest, where we care the least. Yet, instead of castigating us for this lack of appreciation, Advent would rather take the necessary steps to instill this appreciation anew. Therefore, Advent poses three basic questions to oasis seekers. Why prepare? What does it mean to prepare for Christ? How can we prepare?

Why prepare? The answer to this question is always dictated by the importance we attribute to the event that raises the question. Just because something is happening or someone is coming, does not mean we must prepare. We prepare for the things in our lives which we deem to be important. It reminds me of a young man whom I urged to take important, urgent preparatory steps for the sake of his well-being, indeed, for his life. With sadness in his eyes he said to me, "Father, you are assuming that my life is as important to me as it seems to be to you". The tears of that moment return to my eyes even as I write these words.

These are painful words, but revelatory ones. God hears them often. His passion for our lives is not always reciprocated. We often attribute less importance and value to our lives than God does. Yet, since we prepare in direct proportion to the significance of the event for which we are readying ourselves, this can lead to a tragic negligence towards our lives. The more important the event, the more we prepare. Thus, we put in considerable effort to organize and plan a dinner party for guests we consider important. We do less when the neighbours are coming over for a quick chat. But we pull out all the stops when the boss is coming over and a possible promotion is in the air. Priority determines preparation

The religious kneejerk response at this point is to say: »We should prepare for Christ because he is our priority. He is the most important person and event in our lives.« That is true, but not enough. It was never God's intention that we should prepare for his coming for his sake alone, but also for the sake of our own lives. Prepare for Christ, indeed, but never forget that this is also for our sakes. In Jesus we encounter the beauty and glory of God in tenderness and touch, the oases we so crave in the shadowlands of loneliness and isolation. Prepare a place for Jesus, because at every oasis where we encounter him, we will find something life-giving for our parched lives, something soothing for our painful wounds. The old Gospel song sings: »There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin sick soul.« Once you hear that story and know where the balm is to be found, it is time to make preparations for a trip to Gilead.

However, our priorities will tell the true story of what is deeply valuable to us, and sometimes our priorities betray us. A confirmation teacher once expressed this very plainly to me when she told me that all the students told her that confirmation was precious to them. But then everything took precedence over confirmation classes: Brownies, Girl Guides, Boy Scouts, hockey, choir, ballet, volleyball and figure skating. We prepare for the things dear to our hearts. Sometimes we simply do not notice, that these things are not what we think they are. If our priorities are all wrong, then there is no use in even addressing the issue of preparation. We can cry out, »Prepare the way of the Lord«, but if the Lord, his life and his love are not a priority, then we are wasting our breath.

What does it mean to prepare for Christ? It means that we must continuously adapt and grow with the situations around us that are changing. It means, we must know the lay of the land and take whatever precautions are necessary to find the next oasis. We are to seek ever deeper knowledge of Christ and his ways in the midst of the turmoil and struggle which surrounds us. As Paul writes to the Philippians; »My prayer is that your love for each other may increase more and more and never stop improving your knowledge and deepening your perception«. In this way we shall also fill valleys and lower mountains by removing hindrances to our growth and growing to full maturity in Christ.

The greatest foolishness in this regard is to believe that we are ever finished, that we are prepared once and for all. Advent is a lifelong journey and not a trek of four weeks. The faith experience of an eighteen year old might possibly meet the spiritual needs of that age. But how can it possibly meet the spiritual needs of a thirty year old, struggling to bring up children, to offer guidance to adolescents, to secure the future of a family? Faith is only childlike in children. It becomes childish in adults. For all the trivialization of faith in such sentences as »maintaining a childlike faith«, we should never forget that you do not send children into deserts. That is the work of adults. Indeed, the best childlike qualities of faith can only navigate the desert and find oases if they are found in adult children of God.

In all our preparation we are dedicated to the single-minded pursuit of our one goal and greatest priority, the fullness of life which Jesus craves to share with us. But in realizing that call we also have to constantly seek Christ in the ever changing landscapes of our lives. For being prepared in one instance and in one set of circumstances says little or nothing about our readiness in different and changed circumstances. Thus, our challenge is not just to be prepared, but to be preparing.

How can we prepare?

There are as many answers to this question as there are Christians. I would offer three unconventional suggestions. First, we could start by being attentive to the words of Baruch and take off the dress of sorrow and distress and put on the beauty and glory of God. We are called to be a people who prepare for the coming of the Lord by being joyful and festive. Yet, we are people of very selective festivity. Only great occasions seem to merit effusive celebration, be it Christmas dinner or the winning of the world cup. That is a basic recipe for resignation, because we hardly live the major part of our lives in the moments of the spectacular. Yet, the true art of joy is to learn to celebrate at every oasis we come upon.

At the start of this year's Advent, I took part in an Eritrean coffee drinking ceremony. Normally, when I want to drink a cup of coffee, I press a button on the coffee machine, wait a few minutes and then walk away. But this time it took an hour. First the green coffee beans were roasted in a small pan on an open flame. Then, when the room was already filled with the wondrous aroma of roasted coffee, the young woman brought the roasting pan to each of us, so that we might inhale the scent. It was like being incensed by aroma. Then she ground the coffee beans, poured the ground coffee into a gourd, poured water into the gourd and then set it back onto the open flame. Over a long period of time the coffee came to a boil, a small filter was stuffed into the opening of the gourd and each of us received a cup of coffee. This was followed by a second brewing and a second cup, and again by a third brewing and a third cup.

Taking delight in the simple pleasures, stretching out each moment and relishing each distinct stage of them, is a very high art indeed. Even if you do not enjoy coffee as much as I do, the joy and pleasure of the moment, the utter relaxation into each other's company, was a foretaste of heavenly joy. I am pretty sure that the Eritreans are in charge of coffee making in the Kingdom of God.

Yet, my tale does not end there, indeed, it cannot end there. Our four hosts were all refugees from Eritrea. They have been brutally ravaged by the corrupt and violent regime of their homeland. They bear deep inner scars from years of flight, homelessness, insecurity and rejection. They have literally traversed deserts, physical ones and spiritual ones. Yet, they could create an oasis of joy, of celebration. They could prepare an oasis in which we could celebrate being alive, being together,

being community. How many of us who have enjoyed the security and prosperity of western living, could claim to be able to do the same?

Second, we could prepare by working hard at keeping our yearning alive. Antoine de Saint-Exupery teaches it succinctly when he writes: »If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.« If all we do is work at solutions and results, we will quickly sink into resignation. What keeps us going is the present recollection of why we labour, why this is all worth it. I know a gifted preacher who speaks powerful words of admonishment about environmental catastrophe, injustice, and inequality. That same preacher issues equally powerful words of prophetic calls to rise up, work hard, change choices and alter life-styles. Yet, this preacher breeds resignation, not passion. It is not enough to know the goal. You have to keep the soul alive on the journey to that goal. You have to issue tender reminders of why it is worthwhile to rise again and struggle onwards. You need to offer oases of encouragement and refreshment. It is how God brought the people of Israel through the desert into the Promised Land.

A third possibility is eloquently proposed by Barbara Brown Taylor. She suggests a particularly interesting form of Advent preparation, in the title of her stunningly beautiful book »Learning to Walk in the Dark«. In her critique of what she terms »full solar spirituality«, she points out that we speak only about the sunny side of faith. But genuine faith also teaches us to walk in the dark. For there are treasures in the darkness, not just in the light. Ask Isaiah: »I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name« (Is 45,3). Ask Abraham, when he was comforted by God with the promise that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of heaven. The last time I checked, you can only experience the stars of heaven at night. Gertrud von Le Fort encourages us to seek the oases, the signs of hope and encouragement that are only to found in darkness experiences: »Not only the bright day, the night, too, has its wonders. There are flowers that only flourish in the wilderness, stars that only appear on the horizon of the desert. There are experiences of divine love that given only in the utmost abandonment, indeed, at the edge of desperation.« The constant flight from darkness will deny us too much life.

Advent calls us to meet the challenge of preparation, to re-evaluate our priorities, to work diligently at our human growth and development, to prepare assiduously at our own unfolding, our own becoming. It means that we try to meet the challenge of growing with our God. Could we imagine a relationship with a friend that never changed from the first day to the present? Such a thing is beyond the pale, for it would mark the end of that relationship. As we grow with Jesus, we prepare in order to be able to relate ever more intensely to the fullness of life he came to bring.

The words of the prophet Baruch in the first reading will one day be fulfilled. »Arise Jerusalem, stand on the heights and turn your eyes to the east: see your children reassembled from east and west at the command of the Holy One, jubilant that God has remembered them.« But while that day is coming, we must practice at the oases. If we cannot find something to celebrate in the simple moments of life, it is exceedingly unlikely we will know how jubilation works at the most critical moment. If we want to master jubilation at the end of days, we need to practice all our days.

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