



*Fourth Sunday of Advent reflection by Connecticut Chaplain  
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*The arc of Advent: from messy hearts to the Big Bang*

We started the Season of Advent with the Prophet Isaiah lamenting the human condition (our first reading on the first Sunday of Advent) and we now come to the end of the Season with God's response to Isaiah's lamentation in the Annunciation (our Gospel reading on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent) and soon Christmas itself.

*Like every year, the arc of Advent stretches from misery and longing to a new birth. This is the adventure of our lives.*

On the first Sunday of Advent we asked: "Why do You let us wander, O Lord, from Your ways?" (Isaiah 63:17). Why do we always wander from the true path of happiness and go down the same dark alleys? The same old paths grooved into the flesh of old hearts; the same old, tired scripts. Even "our good deeds are like polluted rags" (Isaiah 64:5) because our true intentions are often hidden from ourselves and almost always tainted with selfish motives. The late Thomas Keating, one of the leaders of the Centering Prayer movement in the US, wrote about 'false happiness programs'\* always running the background of our lives, mostly under the surface of our conscious minds: We desperately try to satisfy our instinctual needs for security/safety, for affection/recognition and control/power, as if to satisfy our needs were the path to true happiness! These 'false happiness programs' are the hidden motives that pollute even our good deeds and control our lives. This is our sinfulness really. These poor, frightened, messy hearts of ours...always run away from the pain.

*But how we long for pure hearts....*

Mary's heart is pure, innocent, undivided. Somehow, by the grace of God, she is "full of grace" already. Not after Gabriel's visitation, but before, already filled with the Eternal Christ. At the Angel's announcement she is "greatly troubled," but not in the way Zachariah was troubled (in a doubtful way); Mary is troubled because the angel mirrors back to her the grace within that was always there, and now she sees it anew, as if outside of her, in the mirror of the angel's smile. "The Spirit will overshadow you," like the Spirit at the beginning of Creation converting pure energy into matter in a big bang of exuberance; and now, another big bang with the Eternal Christ within Mary seizing on the human nature; and a little human cell begins to divide, and divide again, and grows into a child, true man and true God, mystery of hope and joy.

*And how we long for Christ to be born again in the poor, messy manger of our human hearts.*

We cannot heal our poor messy hearts ourselves, but the Spirit can do it for us. We cannot become Christ bearers, mothers of Christ, on our own, but the Spirit must overshadow us and do it for us. We can long for the transformation, and we can consent to Spirit birthing new life in us: "Be it done unto me" Mary said.

*Will you and I consent to the Spirit overshadowing our souls: "Be it done unto me?"*

We cannot save ourselves but what we can do is create the conditions for the Spirit to heal and purify our hearts and birth the life of Christ in us. Three ideas on how to do it:

- *First, we can spend time in meditation and in prayer. We meditate not so much to concentrate our thoughts but to focus on our intentionality, on consenting to the action of the Spirit. We pray not just by saying prayers but by letting these prayers guide us to the deep silence where we need not use words or images but our hearts consent to the Spirit working on us with a single word: fiat. Be assured that the Spirit, if we invite her into our meditation and prayer practices, if we surrender to her, the Spirit will do the work, in the deep silence of our souls.*
- *Second, we can also spend time with the Liturgy and with the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, because the sacraments always carry grace, and again, if we consent to the action of God's grace on us, the healing and the transformation will slowly happen. We must long for it and consent to it.*

- *Third, we can also choose to spend time with the poor, the poor within our family or the poor out there. The poor are these people who will not make us feel more secure, more appreciated, or more in control of our fate; these are the people with whom our false happiness programs do not work and this is why they are such a blessing to us: There, objectively, as we begin to break the shell of our selfishness, the Spirit will rush in and invade our souls and new life will be born.*

Happy Advent to all and (almost) Merry Christmas

\* Thomas Keating: Intimacy with God, an Introduction to Centering Prayer

