

Psalm 146:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11

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TIPTOEING THROUGH ADVENT

So also, when you see these things take place, you know the time is near. Luke 21:31

Tiptoeing, it occurs to me, is a strangely ambiguous activity. On the one hand, tiptoeing is what we do when we are struggling to see or be seen. Standing at the back of a crowd, for instance, trying desperately to see or be seen by someone passing by, perhaps waving or shouting, anything to attract attention and distract the one you want to be seen by. The other sort of tiptoeing is quite the opposite. It's the sort we do with stealth, trying not to be seen or heard, trying not to arouse the attention of one we would rather not confront.

Advent, it seems to me, is a lot like this latter, a form of stealth. We've been trained, after all, over the years to approach the Advent season as a time of preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas. It's a time of expectation, of straining to get a glimpse of the one who is promised. Yet, like Lent before Easter, it's also a time when we'd rather not be too exposed, too scrutinized by the discerning eye of God. After all, there's a big party coming up, and a big personal agenda to complete before Christmas. We want to be found, but not at too great a personal cost. This tiptoeing is a bit like the hide and seek game we all remember. We've all played it. The object, of course, is to steal away on tiptoe to a place where you can conceal yourself. You don't want to be found. Or do you? Of course, you want to stay hidden for a while. But then, if a long time goes by and you haven't been found the "game" loses its edge. You begin to feel left out, forgotten. Secretly, you do want to be discovered. So, you remember what you did. You'd very gingerly put out a foot or a hand. You'd cough or giggle. Anything to draw a little attention to yourself. Because the real point of hide and seek was the thrill of being found, while still trying to make it safely back to base.

There are moments when the isolation game gets old and we stick out a foot or a hand hoping that the one who searches for us all will find us. I think Christmas is a lot like that, when the desire not to be exposed gives in to wanting to come to God again.

Advent presents two seemingly conflicting images of Jesus. On the one hand is the infant Jesus who appears on Christmas day; on the other, is the end times, apocalyptic Jesus who descends on the clouds with the host of heaven--the Jesus of the second coming who occupies so many Advent texts.

The church intentionally places us in a difficult position with such images. The church wants to claim faith in one who embodies these two extremes: On the one hand is the completely helpless child, the perfect instance of a thoroughly dependant humanity. On the other is the sovereign God whose power, authority and appearance surpass anything of human origin. Jesus, the God-man embodies both. If your faith is anything like mine, you find your soul this season straining on tip-toe, to reconcile the two as they pass by.

Infants, we are familiar with. Anyone can recognize one. But looking into a straw laden

cattle trough and believing that the drooling infant that you see there is to be the Savior of the world, even at the instigation of an angel, is still a tremendous act of faith, especially when you have to wait the gospel's thirty years to catch a glimpse of him again. Yet God asks us, who never saw the manger or the hillside apparition of angels, to have such a faith.

God also asks us to have a faith that is as massively overwhelming as the second-coming images of the Advent season. The whole wonder of this season, it seems to me is that this cosmos filling God is the one who risks being among us and within all of us, feeling our joys and pain, our embrace and abandonment, yet never leaving us.

Faith's stands on tiptoe a lot this season, is a risky business. Coming to terms with such a vast yet personal God means we might have to change some things about ourselves that we suddenly see differently. Our redemption, after all, has very little to do with what we believe, what we give a sort of intellectual assent to. Redemption has a lot to do with change, with transforming who we are and acting in ways that mark us as redeemed people. Going on tiptoe this Advent season expresses the hope that we might, just might, get a clearer glimpse of Jesus. Do you recall from experience that the thing you most resist or most procrastinate on turns out to be not a curse but a surprise of blessings. As in a rare moment of discovery, one who both fascinated and traumatized you suddenly gave you laughter and joy and security, like that childhood game when the seeker threw arms around you, and all was blissfully well.

Step out of the shadows this Advent, and risk meeting Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

Amen.