

Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

The Advent and Christmas poetry of Scriptures are inspiring, aren't they? But, it's only poetry after all. What match is biblical poetry when set against the morning paper, or the evening news, or life on the job, or difficulties at home?

Perhaps what we love so much at this time of year, what compels us to extend the church year's 12 days of Christmas, which begins on Christmas Day, to the merchandizing year's 60 days of Christmas, with Christmas merchandise out on the shelves shortly after Halloween, is the 1-2 month-long "time out" it seems to provide for us from the harsher facts of life. We know in our hearts that tinsel and garland and twinkling lights and maxing out our credit cards have precious little, if anything, to do with preparing the way of the Lord, with making his paths straight. We don't need preachers and other guardians of the faith to harangue us about that all during Advent, every year.

We also know that simply surrounding ourselves with Christians symbols doesn't necessarily make our Christmas preparations and celebrations "Christian," just as dangling a huge cross from a pierced ear, or a small one from a pierced navel, doesn't make a *person* a Christian. Many nonbelievers celebrate Christmas, and wear cross jewelry.

So what is the enticement? What is the lure which draws no-frills, down-to-earth common sense people like us into this overwhelming preoccupation with transforming our everyday world – our homes inside and out, our shopping malls and streets – into something bordering on a twinkling fairyland for over a month?

Why is it that the 12 days of Christmas just don't seem like enough time for singing our loudly joyous and our quietly beautiful Christmas hymns, so we sing them all through Advent as well?

And why has the biblical poetry of Advent and Christmas so captured human hearts that it has been put to music a hundred different ways, and may be virtually the only Scripture verses many of us know by heart?

The answer lies before us in Scripture itself. It stares us straight in the face, and is so obvious we easily miss it. It doesn't set Mary's pregnancy, Jesus' birth, or the story of John the Baptist, in a fairyland type setting. It is all set in the "real world" of deserts, harsh Roman rule, and politics. We, just like the people we're reading about and reflecting on during Advent, live with one foot in each of two different worlds: the world of human history, and the world of *God's* history. Actually, it's not so much two different worlds, as it is two different ways of *viewing* the world.

According to human history, the world is organized according to the *powerful* and the *powerless*, the winners and the losers. The powerful/the winners, set the terms and define what's what. The powerful shape reality for the powerless, who usually have no official or public voice. Every empire on earth throughout human history has insisted that it was the greatest, most noble, most beautiful, most advanced, most enduring civilization that would ever be seen on earth – including the United States. Until recently in our country, we were taught U.S. history only from the viewpoint of the winners, and were encouraged to view the whole world through that lens.

In recent years, we have had the opportunity to hear the history of this land, just as we

hear ancient history in Scripture, from the viewpoint of the “losers” – from the viewpoint of native Americans who were here and had established astonishing civilizations, in some cases, centuries *before* Columbus “discovered” America; and from African Americans, whose slave labor built much of our early economy. The story of the history of America reads a bit differently from their viewpoint.

The “winners” write human history with an effort to convince us that the “real world” is simply what we see before us, and they place before us only what they want us to see.

Some years ago, I attended one of the national ELCA youth gatherings with roughly 40,000 teenagers from around the country. Near the end of the event, I was standing in the subway, waiting for the train that would take me to my hotel. There was a policeman on patrol there, as hundreds of youth descended into the subway to catch their trains. I asked him how things had gone with all of these teenagers descending on the city. He said, “I only wish all conventions were like yours – adult *or* teens. We haven’t had a single call, a single incident the whole time you’ve been here.” Where were the local and network news people when these *40,000 teenagers* descended on a city, learning, worshiping, doing service projects all over the city -- and the police are standing around with little to do! They were telling the community and the nation only about a local kid or two who had broken the law that day. It was like two different worlds.

That stuff is served up to us day in and day out. Then, politicians and political parties offer us contradictory plans of salvation from all our national and global woes, and seek to claim our loyalty and devotion no matter what they had to do or say to get it. *They* will save us from our sins!

In Advent, we are reminded that there is another way to view history – God’s view. From God’s view, the “real world” isn’t simply what we see before us. When we see before us is built on what Mary calls in the Magnificat, “the imagination of our proud hearts.” The truly *real* world has *God* at the center of everything, not on the fringe; the *real* world proclaims that God is not just a religious fairy tale; it proclaims the mighty acts of God throughout human history, just as we see it told in Scripture.

The most astonishing thing we experience in Advent and the 12 days of Christmas is this: because we so easily get lost in our own wilderness and can’t find our way to God, God makes his way to us. Remember that song, “We are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder...every rung goes higher, higher”? I hate that song! That’s not the way God moves! *Jesus comes. To us.* Quite literally, heaven comes to earth: Gabriel to Mary, hosts of angels to shepherds and, most astonishing of all, a baby boy named Jesus – God himself, in the flesh, born in a barn -- to us.

Few of us make big moves in our lives; even little moves can scare us. But here, in a daring move against the status quo, God bulldozes a way through the political agendas of presidents, emperors and other rulers, through secular politics and religious politics (which is oftentimes worse) and violent fascist politics, and news organizations – and comes directly to us showing us that hope doesn’t rest in a new administration, a new government program or the removing of old ones, a new tax plan, in gun control *or* in an armed citizenry. Hope rests in the one about whom this beautiful biblical poetry dreams, about whom biblical musicians and singers sing, about whom sacred story-tellers tell their captivating tales.

People without hope are easier to manage.

People without dreams are easier to govern.

People without singers and storytellers and poets are easier to deceive, because people who don't or dream or sing or tell our stories are people *without a memory*, who have no other choice than to expect what is simply before them.

I would like to believe that the reason we otherwise down-to-earth, practical, common-sense people get so into tinsel and garland and red bows and twinkling lights that we can't restrain ourselves during Advent, isn't that we have merely been suckered into the materialistic glitz and dazzle of the commercial holiday season; but that we are Christians dreamers and singers and poets and story-tellers who see *beyond* what is simply before us.

I would like to believe that we can't restrain ourselves during Advent because the living hope at Christmas has swept our other foot out of the numbing human view of history and that we stand squarely, or perhaps even dance, in God's view of history – where the meek inherit the earth, the poor see God, the peacemakers are children of God, and *all people everywhere* see the salvation of God.

I would like to believe that our efforts to transform our homes and malls and sanctuaries into a glimpse of heaven on earth isn't just an effort to escape reality as the cynics among us insist, but is an effort to rise above the wilderness in which we live, to be a beacon of light and hope, as we prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts, our homes, our culture.

I would like to believe that such preparations don't distract us, but rather enable us, amid the strains of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" to passionately dream and sing and pray "Stir up your power, O Lord, and come again."

*Rev. Joan Gunderman, Faith Lutheran Church, Swanburg, MN*