

“Never have I entered on Advent so vitally and intensely alert as I am now. When I pace my cell, up and down, three paces one way and three the other, an unknown fate in front of me, then the tidings of our Lord’s coming to redeem the world and deliver it have quite a different and much more vivid meaning.”

These words come from the Advent meditations of Father Alfred Delp, written from prison, during what would turn out to be his last Advent season on earth, 1944. He was executed the following February. His crime was simply trying to envision a new social order, a Christian social order for his country, once the grip of the Nazis had been broken.

Father Delp’s Advent meditation continues, “My mind keeps going back to the angel figurine someone gave me as a present during Advent two years ago. It bore the inscription, “Be of good cheer. The Lord is near.” A bomb destroyed it. The same bomb killed the giver of the gift.” Can you imagine how different, how urgent, the news of the Lord’s coming must’ve sounded to Father Delp?

For many of us here today, I suspect the problem is not how different Advent sounds this year. Our problem is that “Advent Present” sounds just like “Advent Past.” Advent’s Scripture lessons are almost as familiar to you as the carols of the season. The “Baptist’s cry” and the “prophet’s foretelling” are like ornaments that we unwrap, display, enjoy, then carefully pack away so we can enjoy them next year. Advent’s longing and patience and hope—these we slide into again like an old Santa suit that may not fit as well as it used to, but, no worries—we won’t have to wear it for long.

Then again, this Advent you may identify with Father Alfred Delp all too closely. Circumstances have got you on heightened alert. The way life is for you, you’re on tiptoes, waiting for the Lord to intervene. You may identify with Father Delp, which means you may also identify with John the Baptist.

Think about John’s situation. He was the voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord. He was the new-school Elijah, confronting hypocrisy and calling people to repentance. He was the Baptizer, who brought Jesus himself up out of the water, to the acclaim of God the Father, while the Holy Spirit hovered around. And this mighty ministry landed him where? In prison. The author of this gospel (Matthew) does not tell us how John felt about this. He does tell us that “John...sent word by his disciples and said to Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Do you sense disappointment in that question? Are you right there with John the Baptist and Father Delp--filled with hard questions; waiting for some kind of sign?

Then look at what Jesus does. Actually, first, look at what he does not do. He does not change John’s circumstances. He does not march down to the prison and use his power to fling the gates open. Instead, He gives John a message. He gives you a message, whether your Advent is same-old-same-old or filled with intensity. Jesus said, “Go and

tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

What is that? Does Jesus even answer the question? Yes he does, and the answer is definitive. Each of the things Jesus names--blind receiving sight, lame walking, and so forth, are things that had been specifically mentioned in the prophecies of Isaiah, approximately 600 years beforehand. By our modern method of chapter and verse, Jesus references Isaiah 26:19, 29: 18, 35: 5-6, 42: 18, and 61: 1-2. These are all events that Isaiah says will take place when God's Servant finally shows up. And these things were happening wherever Jesus went. Jesus puts the dots out there for John to connect. Jesus is saying, "I am the One that Isaiah was talking about."

By doing this, Jesus teaches you and me something extremely important. It's the very thing that can shake up a sleepy, same-as-it-ever-was Advent. It's the lifeline thrown out to Father Delps and John the Baptists everywhere. Jesus teaches us to think Biblically. Look at what he does. Jesus sends John back to the prophet Isaiah. The blind see, the lame walk, lepers cleansed, deaf hear, dead raised, poor hear the gospel. Jesus says, it's all there in the prophetic Word if you're willing to look. The answers are there. You may like them. You may not. They might offend you. If they don't, you're blessed.

Step One to Thinking Biblically is to Examine Holy Scripture. That may be the most ridiculously obvious thing I've ever said in a sermon. But, it is absolutely, 100% necessary to say. There is no substitute for searching the Scripture. We all come to the Bible with opinions and assumptions; followers of Jesus will be constantly challenged to weigh our opinions and assumptions against what God has said. This is not a project that you finish in a day or a weekend. It requires ongoing persistence, openness, but most of all, it requires that you actually do it--that you take the time that is necessary to dig in and find out what God actually says. What promises does God really make to us? What is the kingdom that Jesus keeps talking about? How should you treat the people in your life? Why is there suffering? The Bible speaks to these issues and so many more. The question is, are you looking? Some would say, "I can't afford to spend any time on that right now, with all that I've got going on." But the truth is, you can't afford not to. Step One is Examine Holy Scripture.

Step Two of Thinking Biblically is to compare what Holy Scripture says to your experience. Remember, the first thing Jesus says to John's messengers is: "Go and tell John what you hear and see..." What YOU hear and see. He's asking them to draw their own conclusions, based on the list of Isaiah's prophecies that He is fulfilling. Jesus makes a daring invitation here. He says to John, here is what the prophet said about God's servant; the Messiah. Look at what I'm doing. What's your conclusion? What do you hear and see?

What makes that daring? It's a risk! Jesus doesn't force anyone to follow him. There's no coercion. There's freedom here that is a little scary, because we can say 'no.' We can turn away from what he offers us.

It's a daring invitation to you as well. Jesus sends you to search the Scriptures, and then invites you to compare it to your experience. What does the Bible say to you about suffering? About hardships? About guilt? About grace? What does the the Bible say to you about despair and hope? About faith and love? What does it say to you about Jesus' cross and death and burial? About his resurrection and ascension? What do you hear and see?

How does the truth of Scripture square with your experience? Have you ever waited a long time for the answer to your prayer? Do you know what it feels like to be forgiven of something really awful? Have you ever seen someone with faith in Jesus face death with incredible peace? Have you ever known the joy of serving someone who can't do anything to repay you? Have you ever taken your hands off the wheel of your life and let God navigate?

When you compare your experience with God's Word, you begin to understand the depth of the problem of sin, which makes the gift of mercy and forgiveness more sweet all the time. You will see the wisdom of God's Word, how it describes human nature so accurately; how it gets our desperate need for God so right, never shying away from heartache or fear. Maybe most of all, you begin to accept the price you must pay for being a disciple of Jesus, because you have a clear and overwhelming picture of the price he paid for you.

John the Baptist sat in prison, with an uncertain future ahead of him. Father Alfred Delp sat in prison, with an uncertain future ahead of him. There is an uncertain future ahead of you. According to Jesus, what ought we do? Step One: Examine Holy Scripture. Step Two: Compare it with your experience. You will find that God rarely does things the way we think he ought to. But in faith, you can learn to trust that his decisions are always right. This can change the direction of your Advent and Christmas. This can give you what you need to stand strong in your current circumstances. If you follow these two steps over the course of your lifetime, I promise that you will be shocked, stunned, disturbed, amazed, relieved, empowered, and changed. And on that note, I give Father Delp the final word: "Let us pray for receptive and willing hearts that the warnings God sends us may penetrate our minds and help us to overcome the wilderness of this life."