

Advent II

Cycle C, 12.9.18

Baruch 5:1-9/Philippians 1:4-6/Luke 3:1-6

A WORLD WE AWAIT... A WORLD WE CAN CREATE

A simple act of kindness can dissolve centuries of horrible stereotypes. A couple years ago, a Muslim congregation in Reston, Virginia, had outgrown its facilities and was looking for a place to meet for evening prayers during Islam's holy month of Ramadan. When a Jewish synagogue heard that the Muslim congregation was looking for space, they offered the use of its hall. The synagogue was not just tolerant but welcoming to its Muslim neighbors. Members of the mosque greeted their Jewish neighbors with the Hebrew greeting *Shalom*, and the synagogue community responded with its Arabic equivalent *Salaam*. The rabbi spoke at the Islamic community's Friday afternoon prayers; the imam spoke at Friday evening Shabbat services.

The relationship has grown between the two congregations. The Muslim community has been invited to continue holding their Friday prayers at the synagogue. The rabbi and imam planned a trip together to the Middle East.



The imam, who grew up in the Sudan, said that he had never met a Jew until he moved to the U.S. in his 20s, nor had he ever imagined having a close relationship with a rabbi. His congregation's experience with the synagogue had shattered stereotypes. One member of the Muslim congregation said, *"I will not look at the Jewish people the same."* The rabbi said the relationship works both ways. *"You really only get to know someone when you invite them into your home . . . you learn to recognize their faces. You learn the names of their children."*

This is certainly a contrast to the alarming experience in Switzerland a few years ago, when 58 percent of Swiss voters approved a ban on the building of new minarets.



The minaret is the tower attached to a Muslim place of worship from which worshippers are called to prayer, something like the bell tower on a Christian church. When the minaret referendum was proposed by the conservative Swiss People's Party, no one took it seriously. Some consideration was given to having it declared invalid on the grounds that it was unconstitutional as well as a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, but in the end the government agreed to allow the referendum to go forward, probably

hoping that it would be roundly defeated and then become a symbol of Swiss open-mindedness. So certain were the politicians of prevailing that hardly any publicity was fielded against the initiative. As a result, the streets were dominated by the proponents' posters which showed a veiled woman in front of a forest of minarets that looked like missiles.

The truth is that minarets had never been a problem in Switzerland. There were only four in the entire country, some of which had been standing for decades. And only two other minarets were being planned. Most mosques are in faceless industrial districts where no one notices them, which is precisely the problem. Unlike the Jewish and Muslim congregations who got to know one another personally, the average Swiss citizen has no real contact with Islam. They don't know the names of their Muslim neighbors' children. Most people encounter Islam only through the news media, which don't report on the ordinary lives of Muslims in their country but focus on terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, Iranian plans for an atomic bomb and images of violence and destruction. The warlike face of extremist Islam obliterates the lives of everyday Muslims who practice a religion of hospitality and tolerance.

Advent's "highway" for our God is built one smooth stone of kindness and understanding at a time. There are so many wastelands and barren places into which we can bring the life of God, so many crooked roads that we can transform into highways through our charity and forgiveness, our sense of humility and gratitude. The work of

Advent is to bring light to the dark chasms of ignorance, to fill in the valleys of poverty and want, to make low the mountains of injustice, to straighten roads made impassable because of mistrust and hatred. The prophet Baruch proclaims a vision:

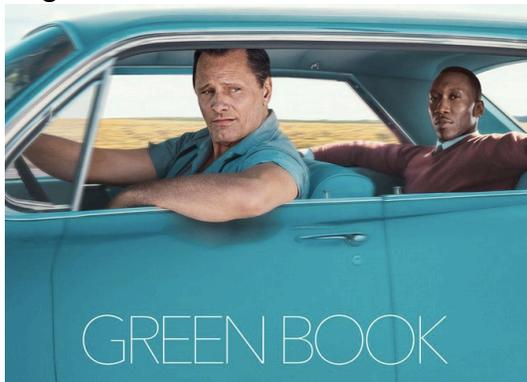


Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights; look to the east and see your children gathered from the east and the west at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that they are remembered by God. The wider expanse of that vision is not limited to the people of the First Covenant, the Israelites of old. It is a vision to inspire all God's children.

Advent is our annual wake-up call to look beneath the glitter of the season to deeper realities. There's no reason you and I can't use the commercial trappings of this time of the year to remind ourselves of the deep spiritual needs we all have. The lights and colors can remind us to look after the beauty and light in our soul and in the souls of those we encounter, no matter how different they may appear to us. The emphasis of giving gifts can remind us that the power of a gift is not in its cost, but the spirit, the care and the friendship it represents. Even the loneliness of this holiday time for some reminds us of the things that really matter and how we can make changes in our life that will center us on love of God and neighbor. It's so easy to lose our bearing and scramble the proper

order of values. What's important gets shunted to the side and what's minor becomes too central to us.

Advent calls us to recalibrate our compass, clean our moral lens, and reboot our spiritual life by following the light of the Gospel. What will it be like when Baruch and John the Baptist's vision of repentance, peace and justice become reality? It may be like the story in a heart-warming film playing locally entitled "Green Book." It tells the true-life story of Dr. Don Shirley, a world-class African-American pianist who's about to embark on a concert tour in the Deep South in 1962. [The pianist is played by St. Mary's College graduate and Oscar-winner Mahershala Ali.] In need of a driver and protection, Shirley recruits Tony Lip, a tough-talking bouncer from an Italian-American neighborhood in the Bronx.



Despite their differences, the two men soon develop an unexpected bond while confronting racism and danger in an era of segregation. The closing scene ends on Christmas Eve – so it's an ideal inspirational film for Advent.

Then you might go online and read a document the American Bishops' recently wrote entitled *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love – A Pastoral Letter Against Racism*. In the letter the Bishops state:

Racism occurs because a person ignores the fundamental truth that, because all humans share a common origin, they are all brothers and sisters, all equally made in the image of God. When this truth is ignored, the consequence is prejudice and fear of the other, and—all too often—hatred.



What wounds are we carrying around? What prejudices prevent us from reaching out to others or from asking forgiveness? What boundaries and walls have we erected in our own minds that block the rays of God's all-embracing Son from shining on us? Imagine how our world would be if we followed the prophet Baruch's invitation to set aside our robe of bitterness and mourning; and place on our shoulders instead the cloak of justice and love.

This is the world
we await in Advent...
This is the world
we can create every day.

John Kasper, OSFS