

## Advent 1A

At Advent, the start of the liturgical year, we begin to look towards the Feast of the Incarnation.

We reflect on the time that Christ incarnated as Jesus in order to teach us the way of love.

It is not that love did not exist before Jesus.

In fact, one of the most loving acts ever was creation itself, when God poured Godself out as the universe, creating out of light and love.

By creating a universe to which to relate, God voluntarily limited Godself.

That is, God took on certain responsibilities and accepted the possibility of rejection, something like when we take in a puppy.

We no longer travel as freely; we take her on regular walks; we limit the use of the roomba until she is on one of those walks, and still she might chew up our favorite pair of shoes.

To love is to accept limitation.

This raises several questions.

First, if everything was created by love for love, as Julian of Norwich tells us, then where does darkness come from?

From where does the ability to do horrible things derive?

As with the puppy, God's limiting Godself means that God allowed us the freedom to say no, to chew up God's favorite sneakers, as it were.

The freedom to love, in other words, is the freedom to limit oneself, or not.

That same freedom means that we can reject love and choose selfishness.

If we could not say no, then our yes would have no meaning.

It is therefore necessary that darkness exist.

It exists for all of us.

The shadow that blocks God's light is cast by our egos.

We have a choice.

The question ever before us is, do we spread hurt and pain by casting our own shadows over others, or do we avoid blocking the light falling on others.

This sounds nice, but what does it mean concretely?

The implication is that, when we witness someone's struggles, rather than denouncing them, as the puritanical do (for they falsely imagine themselves to be pure, that is, without a shadow), or feeling sad for them, which is the response supported by the self-proclaimed enlightened members of our society, we instead identify with them.

Remember Boy George, lead singer of the Culture Club?

(They are still around, but the way.)

There were two officially sanctioned responses to his very public struggles.

Some people chose judgment; they made of him an object lesson to show how righteous they were with the pretense of teaching their children what not to do.

They falsely assumed that their children would face no challenges in the world.

It may not be drugs, but there always will be challenges.

Others demonstrated how “compassionate” they were by being sad for him.

Condescension, pity refuses to acknowledge that *we* necessarily will face challenges, though again not necessarily the same ones.

We judge or pity everyone whose challenges differ from ours (I would never be like *that*) so that we can ignore our own challenges.

Both of these attitudes cast shadows, as they are one-sided, ego-driven, and create darkness in which we can hide.

We skillfully ignore not only our own challenges, in other words, but their effects on others, as well.

We have not learned that life is about becoming rather than achieving.

The most honest attitude, the one most in accord with reality, therefore, is to identify with Boy George’s struggles.

Judgment and pity makes things worse.

Identifying lightens the experience.

If we do not know a person personally, then we can pray *from the perspective of* knowing what it is like to be challenged in life.

It is through our challenges that we grow.

Second, if everything was created out of love and if, from the beginning, there were people who identified with their fellow human beings, then why did we need Jesus?

It is helpful for us to have a name for something, a framework to guide us.

Once we named an experience Seasonal Affective Disorder, for example, some people realized what was happening to them and could more easily search for effective ways of dealing with it.

It was no longer “for some reason, I sometimes feel down,” in other words, but “In the darker part of the year, I feel down, so I need more light.”

Likewise, Christ incarnated as Jesus to teach and model how to live in accord with our created nature, how to acknowledge our own limitations and identify with the limitations of others so that we could all fulfill our purpose, could all grow.

When we follow Jesus’ example, we shed more light than dark on others.

We put on the armor of light, as Paul tells the Romans.

Third, if an incarnation was necessary to make our paths clearer, then why not earlier?

Why would God leave all those “BC” people to struggle on their own?

Well, first of all, there were prophets to help the earlier people, but Jesus came at the right time for his message to spread throughout the world.

Because of the level of civilization in his day, because of roads and trade, letters could be delivered, gospels shared broadly.

Thanks, in part, to the pax Romana and its aftereffects, all of this could be preserved until printing came about, and even more travel and trade, which completed the global spread.

Any earlier, the message might have died on the vine.

Any later, and some people would have missed hearing it.

God has good timing.

In Advent, the appointed readings mention not only the incarnation of Christ as Jesus, but the second coming of the son of man, the return of the Lord.

People often read this return as a single event in history, as if we could say that it will be on March 28, 2029, but the coming of Christ of which we need to be mindful is the appearance of Christ to us in the day to day, those moments when Christ breaks through the quotidian.

Everything is an emanation of Christ, you, Jesus, the person sitting behind you, even that hard pew on which you are sitting.

When Christ pushes forward and appears beyond the mundane surfaces, we may not see it, may be distracted by other aspects of people and things if we do not know to look, if we are not paying attention.

Will we see him through our own ideas that we link together in such ways that they become our own prisons, blinding us to how we might identify with others?

We imagine others to share nothing with us.

Boy George = weird = I'm superior.

“His problems have nothing to do with me,” yet they do.

Christ shatters those chains by demonstrating that love and light was the starting place and that struggle is part of the nature of life on this plane.

Others' struggles may differ from ours superficially, but all of our struggles point us towards accepting our reliance upon God and one another.

We may get there in different ways, but we are moving toward the same point, if we are moving at all.

We each need to consider the chains we have forged that prevent us from being open to the surprising presence of Christ.

We must ask ourselves habitually, “where is Christ in this?”

In other words, how is this teaching me to identify with others?

We cannot escape our own shadows—we would no longer be us—but we need not cast them on others.

We can be led by the light, move towards the light, towards identification with others.

If we are not looking for those flashes when Christ breaks through, we will miss them.

How is Christ going to appear to you next?