

One more reading, if I may, this time from the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is **Ozymandias**, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

The ruined statue tells its own story. A monarch so mighty that a more powerful one could not be imagined had caused his own likeness to be sculpted, with words testifying to his colossal power. And then time had passed, and the monarch's time had passed, and then the memory of him passed, until all that remained were the ruins of his statue and his hubristic words, almost lost in the sands. The merest villager would now be greater than Ozymandias.

Time passes, and things change. Today's reading from Ezra is the poignant story of the exiled Judeans' return to Jerusalem, the ruined city their parents and grandparents had left 50 years earlier. Babylon, which had exiled them, has fallen to Persia. The Persian king, Cyrus, has no interest in keeping them exiled and sends them back home with some financial help. But what have they come back to? Jerusalem has lain in ruins for 50 years, as has the Temple. The people who remain in the land, Israelites, have gotten used to not having the Judeans around, and are not thrilled to have them back. What to do? First, make sacrifices to God on the *site* of the old Temple, "as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God."

Up until the Babylonian Exile, sacrifice had been the main mode of communing with God. That's what made it particularly horrible that the Temple was destroyed and the people were removed: they weren't able to connect with God in the way they always had, since Abraham. So we get this picture of the returnees, a sword in one hand and a brick in the other, putting together a functional altar while watching out for attacks from the locals. Verse 4 says, "And they kept the festival of booths, as prescribed, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the ordinance, as required for each day." It goes on to name the current hereditary priests who carried out their duties as their ancestors had done in ancient days, citing the directions of King David. There is such an emphasis on the replication of ancient ways and the *dailiness* of the sacrifices, as if they were determined to nullify the 50-year gap in ritual activity by carrying on perfectly.

Of course, this is what ritual does: it puts things in order. It connects past and present and future, and allows for a re-set. The sacrificial offerings that the Judeans make on this occasion are not penitential. They're not trying to make amends for some wrong they might have committed. They're trying to re-establish relationship with God, to re-establish normalcy. They're celebrating the festival of booths *even though* they haven't harvested, because they weren't there earlier to plant a crop let alone harvest it. But it's time for the festival of booths, so they will celebrate it.

When it comes to the actual celebration, when the whole community is gathered, though, the shouts of joy from the young mingle with the weeping of the elderly. It is a joyous and hopeful occasion, this resumption of worship at the site of the first Temple. But it is also starkly different from the Temple of memory, which had stood strong and stately for hundreds

of years, and which had been thought to guarantee the security of Jerusalem and the Davidic line forever. The elderly are those few who remember the grandeur of the original Temple and who have survived fifty years of exile, returning thin and gray-haired and recognizing that this crudely rebuilt altar is nothing like what they had left behind. God is good, and God's steadfast love endures forever, but what was lost has not been restored. There is no way back, only a way forward, and that way is by repeating the ancient rituals.

Advent is our ritual. Every Advent we light the candles and arrange the nativity figures around the wreath, telling the story of the people who lived in darkness and who saw a great light. This Advent ties us back to Advents past, and forward to those in our future. The Advent of our Savior is also when we re-set and start the church year over again.

In my lifetime, and in the lifetimes of most of us, Advent 50 years ago was much grander and more splendid than today. I remember a big sanctuary filled with people, and enough Sunday School children that we could break into four good-sized groups and process from one corner of the sanctuary to another, singing "Quem Pastores," the oldest kids carrying candles. The organ shook the windows, and when the whole congregation sang, you couldn't hear your own voice, it was so loud. The choir and the minister wore robes. There was a processional and a recessional, fresh flowers on the communion table every week, and an unassailable sense of decorum at all times.

I have learned much later about all the sociological forces that converged to favor the highest church membership in American history in the 1950s and 1960s—the melding of religion with patriotism during the Cold War, the homogenization of civil religion, the postwar prosperity that fostered optimism and collective ambition. But at the time, we just thought we

were doing things right. The church was respected and important in society because we were thoughtful and spiritual.

How the mighty have fallen. Civil religion made way for the rise of the Christian Right, and a combination of factors diminished general interest in church participation. The once “mainline” denominations are now graying and losing membership and wealth and influence. But in our exile, we have also discovered what we do not want to retain from our old glory. We don’t want to retain the walls that kept out LGBTQ people back in the 1960s and 70s. We don’t want to retain the unconscious assumption that Christianity is the best and only way to know God. We don’t want to retain another unconscious assumption, that being educated or sophisticated or initiated should insulate us from suffering. Having been reduced to essentials, we are freer to see that what sustains us is the hand of God. We are freer to see that God shows through where we hadn’t thought to look for God before.

The cyclical return of Advent fuses the splendor of the past to the humbleness of the present, and we know that into the future Advent will come around again and again, smashing time together so that it’s not linear at all but simultaneous. What we have lost is not coming back, but it’s not forgotten either; and it’s not needed either. What we have today may be stripped down and rudimentary, but it is strangely right for our day. In an age suspicious of institutions, a time of grotesque income inequality, the strength of the church must be in its human-ness, its vulnerability, its willingness to take people as they are and see the eyes of Jesus in each face.

Advent for us is the assurance that the darkness in which we wait will be split open by a simple, elemental event: the birth of a baby. I mean, what could signal more clearly the

presence of God and hope for the future than this most elemental event? It is both not rocket science *and* the Mars rover, obvious and amazing beyond words. We have waited in darkness when we were ascendant in society; we wait in darkness now stripped down to the essentials. Whether the Temple is splendid and shining or crude and ramshackle, Advent is the same: the intentional acceptance of today's darkness and God's promise to bring new light.

God of restoration, you brought your people home from exile and in their joy they rebuilt your temple. Deliver us from our personal and communal exiles, and help us to build up your church. Amen.