

The Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski, who spent his life traveling, thought a lot about the encounter with the Other as a universal and critical human experience. He wrote,

Archaeologists tell us that the very earliest human groups were small family-tribes numbering 30 to 50 individuals. Had such a community been larger, it would have had trouble moving around quickly and efficiently. Had it been smaller, it would have found it harder to defend itself effectively and to fight for survival.

So here is our little family-tribe going along searching for nourishment when it suddenly comes across another family-tribe. What a significant movement in the history of the world, what a momentous discovery! The discovery that there are other people in the world! Until then, the members of these primal groups could live in the conviction, as they moved around in the company of 30 to 50 of their kinfolk, that they knew all the people in the world. Then it turned out that they didn't—that other similar beings, other people, also inhabited the world! But how to behave in the face of such a revelation? What to do? What decisions to make?

Should they throw themselves in fury on those other people? Or walk past dismissively and keep going? Or rather try to get to know and understand them?

That same choice our ancestors faced thousands of years ago faces us today as well, with undiminished intensity—a choice as fundamental and categorical as it was back then. How should we act toward Others? What kind of attitude should we have toward them?

We see this struggle still being played out here in Iowa, where Steve King recently (12/8) tweeted, "Diversity is not our strength. Mixing cultures will not lead to a higher quality of life but a lower one." I was a little surprised that he didn't follow up by going straight to Pella and dismantling a windmill, or to the Amanas and shut down a German restaurant, but I guess he was busy. He speaks for many people who are put off by the Other, who think of flourishing as a zero-sum game in which, if others are gaining, I must be losing. Kupuscinski, whose career was spent traveling the world, noted that we have evidence not only of ancient battles and

barriers but also of cooperation and covenants: old marketplaces, trade routes, ports and agoras. “All of these were places where people met to exchange thoughts, ideas and merchandise, and where they traded and did business, concluded covenants and alliances, and discovered shared goals and values. “The Other” stopped being a synonym of foreignness and hostility, danger and mortal evil. People discovered within themselves a fragment of the Other, and they believed in this and lived confidently. People thus had three choices when they encountered the Other: They could choose war, they could build a wall around themselves, or they could enter into dialogue.” <https://www.facinghistory.org/civic-dilemmas/understanding-strangers>

The people of Israel were no exception to this human experience, and we see their various reactions play out nakedly in the Bible. On the one hand, they are told that they are special to God, that they are the object of God’s love, that they have a unique destiny, that they should feel free to invade Canaan and decimate the population because God likes them better. On the other hand, there are frequent anomalous voices with the opposite message: the book of Ruth, telling them that King David’s grandmother was a Midianite, the prophet Jeremiah telling them to settle into Babylon and love that alien city, the story of Jonah, who was told to go save the lives of the hated Assyrians. And, in the time of today’s reading, we have the Persian king Cyrus held up as an instrument of God, releasing them from exile in Babylon to return to Jerusalem.

When the people of Israel were forced to grapple with the Other, it always precipitated a change—I would say an advance—in their understanding of God and themselves. Being exiled forced them to abandon the idea of God as tribal and local,

and think about a universal God, which means that other people also belong to this God. To repeat Kapuscinski, “People discovered within themselves a fragment of the Other.”

Isaiah 55 is a message for those who are released from exile and facing return to the ruined city of their parents and grandparents. They’re going to have to start from scratch, plus Judah is now settled by lower-class Jews who’d been left behind, Samaritans, and foreigners. They know going back is the right and proper thing to do, but honestly it’s going to be a slog. And here’s what Isaiah tells them, “Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price! . . . Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” God is calling them to a feast. In fact, according to one scholar, this is an allusion to a Davidic custom of giving a feast to the poor once a year, to celebrate all the vanquishing of enemies that the king had done over the past 12 months. Only this time, as God gives the feast, God also anoints the people themselves to be the new King David. “See, I made him [David] a witness to the peoples, . . . See, *you* shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God.”

What follows suggests that the people of Israel were like Groucho Marx, unwilling to belong to a club that would have them as a member. The idea of the feast is great, and no doubt the sheer abundance of God is breathtaking—but apparently not only the nations are going to be called, but the backsliders and faint of heart in the Judean community will be included: “Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may

have mercy on them.” This feast is going to include all the riff-raff. But anticipating objections, the prophet goes on, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Divine grace is not fair, it’s gracious.

What I have said about finding oneself in the face of the Other is now familiar to us. It’s not a hard concept to get across, and I think we all agree with it. But it was once virtually unimaginable to the Israelites, which is why this marvelous invitation to a divine feast has to be followed up with reminders that God does things according to higher wisdom than ours. How can we sit down and celebrate with backsliders, lowlifes, and aliens? How, for that matter, can we become together the new King David, embodying a witness to all peoples? We have never seen ourselves this way, and we do not even know how to picture it.

I find this tremendously encouraging. Advent is the season of hope, but we don’t necessarily have a picture of what to hope for. We know what’s wrong, but we don’t have a solution. But the people of Israel couldn’t picture how to carry out their mission either, and they did anyway, by the grace of God, not that it was always pretty, I won’t lie. My point is, what seemed impossible to Isaiah’s people, we know to be possible. What seems impossible or unimaginable to us is also possible, if God is imagining it.

I do not want to paint a picture of what to hope for. There’s a place for that, and there’s a place for action to realize hope. But Advent is also the season of waiting, and I think that we can’t *really* wait or listen for God as long as we have

already decided what God is going to do, or as long as our busy little minds are still chatting away about our many good ideas. We're not especially receptive to what God might be doing because we're making too much noise. This year we're observing Advent with stillness. So I will close with a section of TS Eliot's poem "East Coker," part of the "Four Quartets" which is all about (in a way) the paradoxical Way of wisdom by self-emptying.

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama
And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away—
Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about;
Or when, under ether, the mind is conscious but conscious of nothing—
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and love and the hope are all in the waiting.

The faith, the love and the hope are all in the waiting. But as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, . . . giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall the word be that goes out from God's mouth; it shall not return empty, but it shall accomplish that which God purposes, however unimaginable it may be.

Let us pray: We thirst for water, O God, and you offer us wine and milk without money and without price. You also ask us to step into the unknown future. Thank you for your abundant grace. We accept! Amen.