

## Surreal: An Advent Departure

1-1-17

Text: Luke 2:21-40



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**Reflection questions...** [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

*“How have you found God in your suffering, this year? What has he stirred within you? Was it in a ‘moment’? How has it heightened your sensitivity to the suffering of others?”*

*“What promise are you holding onto? What promise has God allowed you to hold? In what ways does it still feel like dying? What have you died to which has resulted in peace?”*

*“What rhythms have you established which make you consistently present to and present for God? Do they seem old and tired or ancient and proven? How might you discover new life in your faith practices?”*

*“What is wearying you? (Isaiah 43:24) As a result, does your exertion feel like it’s depleting or replenishing you? What are you willing to forsake in order to seek God?”*

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### Teaching Notes...

I always feel like there’s something about the story of the incarnation that makes you just long to stay... to ponder... to let the mystery wash over you. *“How do we rush past the implications of God taking on human form without compromising any of his God-ness? What it says about God? What it says about us?”*

But, I also get the sense that the story is wanting to release us; to send us into the world with hearts filled with hope; into the *“certain-uncertainty”* of the future.

- There is one thing of which I am certain: the Advent/Christmas story refuses to let us suppose that faith is all about tidy-outcomes and straightforward conclusions. It’s complicated, it’s demanding, it’s provocative. You can’t just walk away so nonchalantly.

**“Surreal”**... the word of the year for 2016. Merriam-Webster said the word was searched more frequently by users than in other years.

The word means, *“marked by the intense, irrational reality of a dream”*. It seems to carry the sense that what you are experiencing is incongruent with reality. You’re staring at it, but you feel that you’re in a “dream-sequence”. You’re awake, but you’re waiting to wake up! What you are experiencing is so divergent with what you would identify as “reality” that it almost paralyzes you.

**Advent always seems to bring us “full-circle”.**

From a simplicity (naivete), which allows us to entertain God-possibilities (particularly as they come packaged in a variety of dreams, visions, angelic messengers), to a complexity which challenges the viability of the promise and our commitment to making sense of it in the context of all that opposes it, and demands clarity to a return to simplicity, which is somehow not quite as naïve, but is more hopeful. It is more mature. It is humble. It is a faith that has been challenged and survived. It is not as demanding, of God or one another.

I'm a bit of a pragmatist, when it comes to my faith, so I'm appreciative that the Advent stories end without a lot of "fanfare"; angels returned to heaven, the shepherds went back to work (glorifying and praising God because everything had been just as the angels had said), and Joseph and Mary go about the ordinary business of raising the Messiah.

That doesn't mean that my faith doesn't allow room for mystery, but that I need a practical means of moving forward which both lends meaning to what I have just experienced and invites me to proceed in ways which accommodates this new trajectory for my life.

I don't usually commit myself to resolutions, at the start of the New Year, because: 1) of the inevitable shame and self-loathing that sets in around the second week of February, and 2) I realize that the truly transformative times in my life have come, not as a result of tragedy or some life-altering event, but as a result of repentance: the willingness to re-think my life, in the absence of any dramatic circumstances suggesting that I have no other choice. Transformation seems to come amidst a host of other options. When I do have a choice [2 Corinthians 7: *"godly sorrow leads to repentance"*]

In those moments, I become more acutely aware of the dissatisfaction I am experiencing, when the circumstances seem to suggest that I should feel content.

Such a posture allows me to hear transformation, not as an ultimatum or a threat, but as an invitation. The invitation dignifies us: it offers us a vision of who we are and who we could become, but also grants us permission to maintain the status-quo.

*"Unless you change, you will never enter the Kingdom..."* Matthew 18:3

There are postures, choices, and attitudes which are incongruent with the Kingdom; which can never produce, nor allow you to experience the goodness of the Kingdom life. Jesus doesn't simply say, *"You have to forgive, you have to be reconciled, you have to be merciful, you have to show love to your enemy"*, but he does say that those who are experiencing the rule of God are committing themselves to such in their lives and are adopting ways of ordering their lives around "truth".

The Kingdom is never theoretical or abstract; it is not simply the accumulation and acceptance of certain God-trivia. The Kingdom only exists when and where people think and act according to truth.

### **Anna:**

She's known her share of hardship [fasting associated with mourning]. Married only (7) years when her husband died. Widowed to the age of (84). The Bible characterizes her as one who never left the temple. She found solace there and, interestingly, her hardships drew her to God, in dependence, rather than away from him, in defiance.

One sure sign of a depth of faith's maturity: Anna was actually able to celebrate the blessings of others without becoming resentful or, in some passive-aggressive way, making others feel guilty for them.

She had witnessed countless children being brought to the temple, presumably, none of them her own, but when she laid her eyes on the infant Jesus, there was revelation... there was recognition. As with Elizabeth, something within her was "stirred".

### **Simeon:**

Notice the words used to describe Simeon: "*righteous*" (*conduct; integrity*), "*devout*" (Torah-observant Jew), "*hopefully expectant*", "*the Holy Spirit was all over him*".

I often wonder when words like "*righteous*" and "*devout*" became so distasteful? How did they get associated primarily with empty ritual and lifeless observance? And, how did they get dis-associated with from the life of the Spirit?

### **What if we have been waiting for the sensational moment--- the ecstatic experience--- when the extraordinary is best cultivated in faithfulness?**

We typically don't equate a "*rule of life*" with being "*filled with the Spirit*", but I have discovered that it is the rule of life which allows us to live expectantly--- which actually anticipates the movement of the Spirit, not in spite of our discipline, but as a result of living the orderly-life.

### **Learn to encounter (be with) God, routinely.**

**"route"** is the Latin root: *custom; established procedure.*

Honestly, the only people that I have discovered to have truly realized transformation in some sustainable fashion, are the ones who have put into place, rhythms, practices, and disciplines which provide substance for their vision. Paul calls it "*training ourselves to be godly...*" 1 Timothy 4:7

Routine does not necessarily equate to lifelessness or ritual. Typically, the practices in which we participate "routinely", result in a certain competence. Routine practices allow me to take responsibility for who I am becoming. They demonstrate that I take Jesus and life seriously and that I realize that no one drifts into transformation.

I just don't think that there is any substitute for making ourselves habitually present *to* and present *for* God.

Transformation is the slow, messy, arduous, incremental process in which God turns our love around so that we are finally pursuing the right things. It will not come without time and intentionality and it is a process that cannot be expedited.

### **Make yourself intentionally available to God and another un-objectively.**

No presumptions. No pre-conceived outcomes. Simply the joy of mutual-discovery. The satisfaction of mutual-revelation.

### **Community is a well we have to dig for ourselves.**

We are acquainted with more people than we can name, we have *web-based* social circles in which we can move freely, we have a host of activities from which to choose--- yet we experience very little community. We don't "know" and we remain "unknown".

**Seek purposefully.**

*"Seek first (of first importance) the Kingdom..."* Matthew 6:33.

Whatever we are permitted to pursue, without restraint or without compulsion, will reveal the most sincere desires of our hearts and will either promote our flourishing or seriously restrict our freedoms.

We always find what we seek because we always seek what we value. By its very nature, that which is glorious demands sacrifice. It's not true that can do it all and that you can have it all. Discern well.

Don't make resolutions which simply help you feel better about yourself, but don't address your deepest desires.