



## DOING SOME REAL ADVENT SPIRITUAL WORK

by [Bishop Robert Barron](#) · December 1, 2020

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We will never be adequately prepared for the coming of the Savior unless and until we feel in our bones that there is something we need to be saved from. If we don't require salvation, then Jesus devolves, very quickly, into one wise man among many, one more spiritual teacher in a long line of similar figures across space and time. The great and ancient Advent chant, "O come, O come, Emmanuel, / and ransom captive Israel, / that mourns in lonely exile here / until the Son of God appear," catches this fundamental Christian truth. Until we feel like prisoners held for ransom, men and women condemned to hopeless exile, we will not sing those words with anything even approaching conviction.

A passage from the sixty-third chapter of the prophet Isaiah provides a series of images that help us to articulate this sense of being in desperate need of salvation. "Why," Isaiah laments, "do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways?" The trope of the path is a common one in the Scriptures: there is a way that we are meant to walk in the spiritual order, and the vast majority of us tend to lose it.

There is a feeling that now only people of a certain age remember, and that is the sensation of being well and truly lost. I limit this to older folks, because today's hyper-sophisticated GPS tools usually permit us to find our destinations with ease. But prior to those wonderful gadgets, when we relied on maps or, more frequently, on directions scribbled on a piece of paper, we much more readily got lost. When I was about seventeen and hence a very inexperienced driver, I was making my way through the streets of Chicago, looking for an expressway entrance. I managed to miss it, and in short order, as darkness was coming on, I realized, with a uniquely sinking sensation, that I didn't really know where I was or where I was going.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* commences with these lines: "Midway on the journey of our life / I woke to find myself alone and lost in a dark wood / having wandered from the straight path." Even if you have found great success in your profession, and even if you are relatively

satisfied in your relationships and your social standing, I would be willing to bet that, at the deepest level, you feel lost, and you don't really know where you are going. As Dante intuited, this insight often occurs when we are at midlife, but we all know the truth of it to varying degrees. As painful as it might be, move, this Advent, into that spiritual space. Feel what it's like to be off the path, disoriented. Then, you will be able to cry out for the one who said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

A second lament from the prophet Isaiah is this: "Why do you . . . harden our hearts so that we fear you not?" For the biblical authors, the heart is the seat of emotion, thought, and action—the core of the personality. It is meant to be "soft" so that God might easily shape it according to his purpose. The hardened heart is like brittle, dry clay, which cracks and shatters at the merest touch of the divine potter. When we are obsessed by our own plans and projects, when we are preoccupied with the prerogatives of the ego, our hearts are hard. In his Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul utters this ecstatic cry: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). This is the language of someone who has allowed his soft heart to be molded utterly by the Lord, who has exchanged the ego-drama for the theodrama. During Advent, we should inquire after the quality of our heart. How have we been resisting the manner in which God wants to shape us? Only those who know that they are hard-hearted truly long for the arrival of the Sacred Heart.

A third and final Isaian complaint is this: "Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people." It is difficult to read any two pages of the Bible in

succession, Old Testament or New, and not encounter a reference to the divine anger. It will simply not do to set this idea aside, as though it were an unfortunate holdover from a benighted time. But we must be careful not to emotionalize the reference so as to suggest that God flies, like a raging, dysfunctional father, into a fit of pique. I would suggest that the divine anger is a beautifully apt metaphor for God's passion to set things right. When sin and injustice deface the beauty of God's beloved creatures and produce deep unhappiness in them, God cannot hold himself in. He rages, as it were, to rectify the situation. Therefore, this Advent, we all ought to identify those actions and attitudes in us that rouse God's anger. I fully realize that the culture instructs us in a thousand ways to affirm our guiltlessness: "I'm okay, you're okay." But the Bible instructs us to admit to our "uncleanness." Once again, this is not an exercise in psychologically debilitating self-reproach; it is a courageous willingness to offer our weakness to the divine physician. It is allowing the God of justice to set things right in us. Until we do this, we will never appreciate the one who said, "I have come to light a fire on the earth" (Luke 12:49), and who, in magnificently high dudgeon, turned over the tables in the temple.

So lest Christmas become one more blandly secular holiday, let us all do some real Advent work: come to grips with how lost we are, how hardened our hearts have become, how we have stirred up God's anger.

## COMMENTS

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