

BALANCING ACT

Sermon for Advent 1C—Lk 21:25-36

LPC, 12/2/12

Are you a balanced person?

We speak of balance as if it is a good thing, but when you think about it, balance can be a difficult and possibly uncomfortable thing. Imagine a tightrope walker. True, balance is the only way a tightrope walker avoids injury or death, but this type of balance requires much preparation before the act and constant sharp vigilance during. Or think of two children on a seesaw. I remember as a child trying to keep the board perfectly level with a friend at the other end. If we managed to achieve this feat, we never remained stationary for long. Eventually we would go back to teetering and tottering.

There are lots of sports where balance is important. The one I'm most familiar with is skiing. In sports, the achievement of balance is almost instantaneously followed by the need to re-balance on a different fulcrum.

Balance is an appropriate meditation focus during Advent, which begins today. During Advent, as at no other time during the church year, we Christians hang in a balance, suspended between past, present and future.

In a lot of ways Christians live continually in balance, between what has already happened in salvation history, and the perfection of creation that is God's ultimate purpose. But in Advent we really live into this ambiguity.

As I've said in previous Advents, Advent is a multi-dimensional concept. Perhaps "multi-temporal" is a better word. During Advent we look to the past, present and future, all three.

We look to the past, recalling the coming of Jesus into the world two millennia ago. We recall not only the events leading up to Jesus' birth, but the even more ancient prophecies that foresaw the coming of God's chosen into the world. That is why our Old Testament readings in Advent are always from the Prophets.

We look to the present, preparing ourselves for the coming of Christmas 2012. Hopefully for Christians, this means not only shopping for presents and decorating our homes, but praying for Jesus to be born anew into our hearts, for the renewal of our spirits. And so our Epistle readings during Advent generally include some practical advice, about living in a way that encourages Christ's work in us, now, today.

We look to the future, because Jesus promised, during his earthly ministry, that he would come into the world again at some point, to put all things to rights once and for all. And so Advent readings are heavily laced with apocalyptic language, telling of what will happen at the end of time, when this "Second Coming" occurs.

With this multi-temporal focus, we can't afford to get fixated on one tense to the exclusion of the others. We know that living in the past is not good. People who live in the past tend to complain a lot because they're always dissatisfied. The present never lives up to memories of the past. This time of year in particular many people get depressed because holidays never compare favorably with the golden Christmases of childhood. People who try to recreate the past are particularly frustrated because the events of the past happened under specific circumstances that may not be repeatable. Getting stuck in the past saps creativity, flexibility, effectiveness, and the ability to recognize new opportunities.

Fixating on the future is slightly better, but here be dragons too. A friend once told me that if it weren't for the hope of heaven when she died she wasn't sure she'd be a Christian. I had trouble holding back my horror at this. Expecting heaven (or fearing hell, for that matter) is a lousy reason to be a Christian. Hoping for heaven may get you through rough patches, but to do so exclusively kills gratitude for the here and now. And, as I've said before, gratitude is a vital ingredient in happiness.

Now, living in the present is supposed to be good, but even this can't be done successfully without reference to past and future. Those who forget the past are condemned to relive it, or at least condemned to reinvent the wheel. Further, to act without consideration for the future is to act irresponsibly.

So, Christians seek balance. The multi-temporal aspect of Advent encourages balance of past, present and future. Advent gives us a taste of what time is like for God.

God is eternal, we say. God is not subject to time. However it is not entirely accurate to say God lives outside of time. God created time and God embraces all times. Being temporal creatures ourselves there is no way for us to fully imagine this. We don't have the words for it. Suffice to say that God is big, much bigger than we can imagine.

This does not put God out of our reach, however. God promises eternal life. God promises us an experience of life that is related both in its timelessness and in its multi-temporal nature to the kind of life God lives.

Remember that eternal life is not so much endless life but abundant life – life unlimited by human imagination or convention. Advent, with its multi-temporalism, gives a peek of what that is like.

We live in the present, knowing that God has brought us this far, not only in our own lifetimes, but going back to our roots in God's good creation. We live in the present, knowing we are part of something much bigger: our lives have a God-given part in the glory to come.

It is challenging indeed to balance past, present and future. But the more we perceive and live into this balance, the more precious and graced each moment becomes. We come to realize that in each moment in which we are poised, God too is poised – ready, indeed longing, to bless.