

“Journeys end in lovers meeting, every wise man's son doth know,” quips the Jester in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. This is the very definition of the comedy—the journey that ends, despite its twists and turns, its unexpected obstacles, setbacks, and losses, in an embrace. The Christian life, like the literary comedy, culminates in the meeting of Lover and Beloved. The Advent of our earthly life, that life which we share with all the Church, will one day end in that Christ's Mass that knows no end, the marriage supper of the Lamb. Yet both comic literature and the essentially comic theology of the Christian faith testify to an uncomfortable fact: it is just before the journey's end, before the happy reunion, before the battle is won and the prize is claimed, that the real difficulty and obstacle presents itself. Odysseus finally reaches Ithaca, only to find his home invested by parasitic suitors to his wife. John Bunyan's pilgrim reaches the outskirts of the Celestial City, only to find the river of death bars his progress. Every super-hero movie, every romantic comedy, involves, at its climax, the overcoming of some last and nearly-fatal obstacle or snag; in the superhero movie, the threat, usually in the form of the Super-villain, is cosmic. In the romantic comedy, it is the death of relationship that threatens. Perhaps it is the enduring power and truth contained in this narrative arc which keeps the makers of superhero blockbusters and romantic comedies in business, no matter how numbingly repetitive and derivative the content.

At any rate, it is just at this critical moment, in both the epic and the romance, that the hero or heroine draws upon some hitherto unknown strength or ability. In the epic, this can take many forms—the revelation of a previously hidden power or weapon, or the last-minute arrival of an ally to tip the scales in the battle of good and evil. In the romance, the crisis is averted through some change in the very character of the hero or heroine—in order for the lovers to finally and decisively meet, some vice must be repudiated in favor of some virtue, some past association of the one must be severed in sacrifice to the new life of the two-made-one. There is always that moment, “darkest just before the dawn,” as the saying goes, when it appears that the change will not be effected, that evil will triumph, that the guy will not get the girl.

The obstacle to the Christian journey and pilgrimage of faith is, as the words of today's collect have it, our own sins and wickedness, through which “we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us.” This involves us in something of a narrative pickle. How can we summon the strength of character to overcome this obstacle, when the crisis *is* our own moral weakness? This is going to have to be an outside job—our deliverance cannot come from within. The brutal simplicity of that fact is, of course, incredibly wounding, if we will be honest with ourselves, to human pride. We are, after all, problem-solving creatures in the main. Our daily lives consist, in great part, of this or that task accomplished, errands run and completed, requests fulfilled, and duties attended. The great tragedy of sin is that, in the one thing needful, that singular and common quest and goal of every human life, at every hour and in every situation—the constant enjoyment of relationship with and in the presence of God—we are so let and hindered by our own self-absorption.

To further complicate the issue, however, is the fact that this outside job, this external deliverance from sin, must of necessity be also an inside job, that is, it must effect, for us and within us, that change in our own nature which we are powerless to achieve. We are in need of a spiritual surgeon. I recently attended my sister-in-law's graduation from nursing school in Jonesborough, TN; at the commencement ceremony, one of the speakers remarked that, among working professionals, nurses qualify as among the most trusted class in this country. When our physical health is threatened, for the most part, we cast ourselves trustfully into the care of educated health-care professionals; we assume that they know best; we follow their orders, submit to prescribed therapies, and dutifully swallow the pills. We must summon a similar, if not wholly superior faith in Him who is the physician of our souls. What can we do? We can get ourselves out of the way; we can submit to the scalpel of the Holy Spirit. We can be, as St. John the Baptizer was, among those who make straight and open the way of the Lord.

SERMON - THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT – 24 DECEMBER 2017

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Deacon Peter Joslyn

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God's therapy, his resolution of our last and insurmountable obstacle, is in coming to meet us, when we are too exhausted, and too broken to continue the journey. This is the glory and the scandal of the gospel; that God “cheats,” and that, by joining His nature to ours, He runs, in the flesh, that last, seemingly impossible mile. Yet, even here, in the meeting between God and Man, we stand in danger of interposing our own self-importance, of allowing our preconceived notions of how things ought to be, at least in our own minds, to obscure His gracious condescension. The Incarnation is a systemic therapy, and God is pleased to start small—not with grandiose and sudden change, but in and with the things that men, in their infinite wisdom, would consider and dismiss as insignificant.

There is, within each and every one of us, a Bethlehem of Judah, in which there stands a manger for Christ to be laid anew; it may be in some seemingly insignificant relationship, in some spiritual wound we have suffered, long since ignored because we have feared to probe it, in some small habit of character which we dismiss as trivial—and it is in that place where our Lord and Savior intends to begin His work of spiritual regeneration, to meet us on the road, and from there to carry us where lovers meet. Let us not, like the Pharisees who questioned John, be numbered with those among whom the Lord is standing, and know Him not. Let us rather make haste, with breathless joy, to find out that place where the Child is to be born. It is in this Spirit of joy and haste that Advent, like a race, is now coming to an end—in a matter of hours. Let us make the most of the time, rejoicing to discover the place of His appearing. The Lord is at hand; the Bridegroom is approaching, though in humble silence, with power and great might, to come among us still, and to lead us where journeys end. + Amen.