

## **Welcome, Advent. It's a Scandal.**

You don't need me to tell you that the economy is not rebounding. You don't need me to tell you that we haven't "rounded the curve" of COVID-19. You don't need me to tell you that there are poor people in the United States of America. You may be one. You know as well as I do that without lots of money or a job with benefits, it's hard to be healthy in this country, and that depending on where you live or what kind of job you have, it may still be hard even if all the provisions of the Affordable Health Care Act stick around or are enhanced. You know too that the poorer you are, the sicker you are. You also know that no matter what finally shakes out with healthcare in this country, we all will probably have to pay a hidden cost of indignity and the not-so-hidden cost of red tape and mystifying paperwork.

You don't need me to cite depressing statistics about housing, or food stamps, the availability of childcare and eldercare—or should I say lack of availability of childcare and eldercare? You know those numbers. And you know that a lot of people are scared right now, imagining that our upcoming change of leadership will not come quick enough to avoid the metaphorical cliffs that we may fall from. The moratorium on evictions ends...December 31 of all times. Christmas. Winter. Right. You don't need me to tell you that this date makes no sense.

You already know without my telling you that school children learn better on a full stomach, and your common sense tells you there should be school breakfast and lunch programs for every kid who needs meals, so you don't need me to tell you that any disruptions to these programs will not only hurt kids now but will also have a long-range effect on the economy and on the social fabric. You don't need me to tell you that children in the classroom right now is a worrisome thing, and that children learning remotely is also a worrisome thing. You don't need me to tell you about the difficult logistics of providing breakfast to children who aren't there.

You've read about them in those human interest stories that appear in newspapers every Christmas, so I wouldn't be telling you anything you don't already know if I were to describe the daily struggles of families that are (what's that grim phrase?) "less fortunate"—as if living in an apartment with no heat, frozen pipes, and an absentee landlord were a matter of sheer serendipity; as if somehow, had these families just been in the right place at the right time a year or two ago, or if they'd "made better choices," they'd be living on Easy Street today. Poverty has an awful randomness to it, to be sure; many people, maybe even some of you, are a paycheck or an illness away from trouble; but you know as well as I do that it isn't all serendipity

You don't need me to explain that the continued existence of poverty in this country is a scandal, that the lack of adequate health care in this country is a scandal, and that scandals by definition are stumbling blocks for the conscience and barriers to belief. Who could believe in a God who says that the poor are dear to the divine heart but whose heart appears to be stone, whose ears don't seem to hear anything, whose arm hangs down, ineffectual, as if having thrown in the towel? And you don't need me to explain that, as far as the Bible is concerned, it is not God who has the stony heart, but

God's people; not God who's deaf, but God's people; not God who has the lifeless arms, but God's people who have thrown in the towel even as they raise their voice in prayer. And you already know perfectly well that the biblical God is notoriously disgusted by piety disconnected from justice.

And you know, if you're ever read the Bible much, that as a result of this disconnect, God found it necessary to come sit down among us (because He knew it was going to take a while) until we were clean enough to carry out, without separation, right worship in the Temple and right action in the world. You don't need me to tell you that if you are indifferent to or exploit your needy neighbors, you will always sing hymns and pray to this God at your peril.

But you don't need me to make you feel guilty either. But if you don't feel guilty—if, for instance, you have made up your mind that poor people are here to stay, and there's nothing anybody can do about it; if you have concluded that government programs are never the answer to social problems anyway—you are not going to feel bad and guilty just because of something I or somebody else may say. Besides, it would be unfair for me to try to make you feel guilty, since so many of you are engaged day in and day out in work that serves the poor and the sick. You don't need me to tell you what you should be doing about all this. You know what to do, and many of you are doing it. You give money, you write to your lawmakers, you vote for change, you belong to organizations that work for justice. You do what you can. You find ways to make human contact with suffering that is not your own. You teach your children about the real world. You preach. You witness. You occupy. You serve. You find a thousand ways to see, to touch, to learn. So you don't need me to give you social justice marching orders. The truth is I could learn a thing or two from some of you.

Let's see. What else is there that you already know and don't need me to tell you? Well, you know it's Advent. And if we're speaking of Advent, then we're also speaking of Incarnation. And to speak of Incarnation is to speak of the conviction that God is not some vague mythic idea, impersonal general concept or feeling, not some sort of generic benevolence; but rather that in a specific person, Jesus of Nazareth, God sat among us and lived a fully human life. Incarnation is the expression of God's solidarity with us, solidarity so complete and full that in some mysterious way that we can't fathom, God is changed, and so are we.

Incarnation is the Christian claim most people, including Christians, find hardest to swallow. It's the scandal that keeps on scandalizing. It's always been easier to believe that Jesus was "divine" than to embrace the implications of a full humanity. It's a oneness with all of us, which sounds very nice and kind of harmless; but the scandal really hits you when you realize who and what "all" includes. You know what I'm going to say next, and you don't need me to remind you of it, but I will anyway: the "all" of Incarnation compels us to confess that God is a shrinking shape on a nursing home bed, an empty stomach at a first-grade desk, a family of eight on an income for two, a man on the bus with six shirts and a tin foil hat who chooses you to sit next to, a newborn wrapped in rags and laid on the floor of a stall, poor, hungry, real.

As I said, this is old news. You've heard it a thousand times. So why tell you things you already know?

We tell things we already know so that we will never forget. And because if the church (that's you and me by the way) doesn't talk about them, and keep talking about them, fewer and fewer people will be talking about them; fewer and fewer, until finally there is only silence. And just think back in history to the horror of such silences, the nasty things that happen when nobody utters a word.

Do you know that already? Let me tell you anyway, again...

