



Pastor's Pen

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THE PLAN

Advent is discovering and subsequently trusting in God's plan for the restoration of His people. A convert from a non-liturgical evangelical version of Christianity, who had deep faith in the direct presence of God in his life, once told us that he thought the time before Christmas would be a great opportunity to study the Old Testament prophecies of Jesus and the New Testament stories prepping us for the birth of Jesus. With his vast Scripture knowledge, he prepared a mini-study of the history of the first coming of Jesus. He thought it would be good for his children to get the birth of Jesus in the larger context of God's plan for humanity.

As he discovered the Catholic Church, he realized he had rediscovered the Advent that we celebrate liturgically for his own family. It was the beginning of his conversion journey, for he began to view the Church as having the wisdom and practice that he was figuring out on his own. That patrimony of the Church includes being the custodian and communicator of God's plan for His people. Advent lets us see the big picture of the reasons for God's plan (He created out of love), the need for Jesus (we sinned and wandered from God), how it happened, and His direct intervention into the life of Israel to prepare them for it. We needed a rescuer, and one was given to us in the baby Jesus.

This weekend, the piece of the plan revealed to us is the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, who would become the last prophet before Jesus. John's mission will be to get the people ready for Jesus. His part of the plan is not the most important, as he clearly will state, but it is an integral part of the plan. His birth is miraculous and unbelievable, and his father, Zechariah, doesn't believe, and so pays the price of being made mute before his birth.

Zechariah's reaction to the revelation of God's plan is like the way we often react to God's plan. We may be of faith, but we will often set that faith from a place in the past or in the future, rather than the present. We'll leave the past and future up to God, but refuse to believe in the plan right now, when it needs to alter our behavior. Zechariah was a faithful man who honored his duties in the Temple with dignity and diligence. He was chosen, along with Elizabeth, to be part of a drama much greater than themselves, but he simply didn't trust it the first time around.

The grappling between God and His people over His plan is constant. It comes communally, just as it did with the Israelites abandoning the covenant, and it shows up individually like Zechariah not believing that Elizabeth could give birth to a child in her later years. It unfolds in believers of all kinds when we can confidently talk about God's plan in the big picture and ignore, or not trust it in our own smaller pictures.

The birth of John was a big picture part of God's plan, but the preaching of John was God using him to get into the small pictures of individual lives. It's not hard to comprehend that the people of Israel knew they were going astray and needed help communally, but it was John who went to them as individuals, reminding them that they were part of the plan, too, and needed to respond with conversion in their own hearts to be ready for it. We are communal people, and we identify the many places in our communities that need reform, but in identifying the big picture places of reform, we may ignore the places in our lives that need reform. That's part of God's plan for the world, too.

This is the season of historically seeing the plan of God come to fruition in the world, but we can't lose sight of the fact that the plan for God in the world also includes a plan for us as individuals. The convert's story of faith included a strong belief in God's presence in his family's life. The Scriptures showed him the plan of God in the life of the world. With the gift of Advent, we see God's plan for the world in our liturgical life, but we need to see the plan in our individual lives as well.