

Advent Orts (on Mandela; the Promise; Francis and Joy; Justice; Certitude)

Colleagues,

Orts. In other words, bits of this, pieces of that. (In case you missed it, see the intro to [ThTheol 793](#).) The ones that constitute today's helping were lying in the path here and there as I stumbled through the week. They somehow caught my attention. Perhaps they'll catch yours. There's a strong whiff of glorious Advent in each of them, or so it seems to me.

1. When I was in South Africa this summer Nelson Mandela was in the hospital and ailing badly. Already the nation had started to keen. As it happens he lingered—or, as faithful ones will say, the Lord kept him among us for a few months longer. At last came the call, and with it an outpouring of appreciation from the world he left behind. President Obama's remarks got the lion's share of attention this week, at least in the U.S. Yesterday we got pointed to [another tribute](#) that's just as eloquent (click on the link) and, even better, that comes from somebody who explicitly serves the Christ whose judgment all sinners await. I'm sure I'm not the only one of us who hadn't heard of [Peter Storey](#) until yesterday. I'm glad I know of him today, and you will be too when, clicking on the link, you discover among much else that he served for some months as Mandela's prison chaplain. My own takeaway from what he writes includes this thought, that God in his overflowing mercy will now and then give all the world a hint of that astonishing final judgment which indeed is on

the way, the one that promises to leave leopards and lambs cuddling together while giggling babies play with rattlesnakes (Isaiah 11:6ff). A hint, I say. Nothing more, not yet, not now. The Nelson Mandela that Storey describes comes across as just such a hint, and a loud one too. He taught his fellow South Africans and others looking on that the sorting out of human iniquity doesn't *have* to equate with wrath and ruination for those deemed to deserve it. There are ways of slaking a vast thirst for righteousness that don't entail the guillotine or the gulag, other and far better ways of setting things broadly right, or at least improving them. Is that what the world noticed earlier this week as it celebrated a rare and wondrous life? I hope so. Meanwhile, let those with a clue get busy and keep touting Christ, the rarest and best of them all, and the world's true hope.

2. Speaking of touting things, I saw somebody on Facebook's ELCA Clergy page (insiders only) wringing her hands over Advent and what to make of it. I sympathized. Time was when I did the same. Then, like lots of you, I read the lessons appointed for the season, the Old Testament ones in particular, and, with what I assume was a swift, hard kick by the Holy Spirit, was moved to start taking them seriously. What to make of Advent? My goodness, dear colleague, stand tall and preach the promises! And for God's sake—I say that seriously, not as an epithet—don't water them down by turning them into things that you or I or the human species in general will be able to effect in the day we get our wits together. Ain't gonna happen, any more than Sarai and Abram will be able, of themselves, to get her pregnant. Ah, but with God all things are possible, and on the Lord we wait. Nor will that waiting be in vain, as today's despairing smart set assumes it will be. What to do with Advent? Please, laugh aloud in

reason's face. Then "get you up to a high mountain"—a middling pulpit, for that matter—and, upon planting a cross, "say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come and save you'" (Isa. 40:9a, 35:4). Advent: what a blast!

3. Some of you noticed just now that I was quoting the Isaiah text appointed for this Sunday, Advent's Third. For reasons as plain as the words of the text, it's also "Joy Sunday," the day of the pink candle as the kids will see it, however much the purists may insist that its real color is "rose." Joy—not grief, not consternation—is the true mood of Advent, and that's so no matter what the preaching of John the Baptist might do in untrained ears, especially when passed along through poorly trained mouths. If only the minds behind those mouths would recall that John, last in a series of astonishing prophets, is an advocate of joy: joy in the tidings that marvels long promised, not least the forgiveness of sins, are about to launch in earnest. Ergo joy. And if you want to get a handle this week on what God's joy is all about, you can't do better than to read the opening eight paragraphs of the new pope's first major teaching document, an "Apostolic Exhortation," as our Roman friends can't help but call it, the title of which is [Evangelii Gaudium](#), or in English, "The Joy of the Gospel." (Need I say it again? Click the link!) I haven't worked with care through the entire document yet, but really, those opening paragraphs are breathtaking. This week I had three Bible study groups read through them. Two were composed of folks as well-schooled and faithful as you can find in any church of an Augsburg persuasion. And in both the first reaction when the reading was done: "He sounds so Lutheran!" In fact what Francis does is to tell the Gospel, and to tell it exceedingly well, not only as a sharp theologian, but also

as a profoundly wise pastor with an intuitive grasp of the *simul iustus et peccator* that baptized creatures happen to be. And to such as us he repeats God's Advent promises and offers Christ. Joy indeed! We could do a lot worse as Lutheran preachers this Sunday than simply to read those opening paragraphs from our pulpits and after that sit down.

4. A phrase I heard on the radio this week in a report about Army courts martial: "they dish out justice hard and cold," or something like that. It got me thinking yet again about the glibness of the "peace-and-justice" talk that seems in mainline circles to have thoroughly supplanted the "evangelism" talk of yesteryear. Justice is the word that sticks most in my craw. Can we know it when we see it? And when we pray for it, can we want what we are asking for? Advent's Fourth Sunday will trot us once again through the Magnificat, with its marvelous yet dreadful words. "He brings down the mighty from their thrones," and "the rich he sends empty away." That's not just me, it's my children too. So also with you and yours. But who of us will hear those words with the fear and trembling they demand? And how dare we ache for God's justice, let alone pretend to peddle it, unless the justice we have clearly in mind is the unique and miraculous kind, not hard and cold but suffused with mercy, that makes its first appearance in the forgiveness of our sins? The only way to push this justice is to start by pushing Christ, God's Justice-For-Us. But is that what our churches are doing? Our teachers and theologians, for that matter? If they were, evangelism would still hold sway as the Church's first and compelling task. That's evangelism as in trotting out "the good message": "Unto you is born a Savior," etc. For what it's worth, Rome's current bishop appears to get this evangelism/justice

connection, and to get it vividly and clearly. See 3. above. Perhaps the time has come for a pope to teach the descendants of Wittenberg some lessons they've forgotten. Now that would be a delicious twist, and thoroughly in keeping with God's *modus operandi*. Again, see the Magnificat. As for "justice" as a word and topic to be explored, much more at some future date, I think.

5. Finally, we pass along a response to [last week's post](#), Ed Schroeder's review of Martin Riesebrodt's *The Promise of Salvation*. It comes from Pr. James West, a retired Navy chaplain who is currently looking after a congregation in the San Diego area. Note the Advent-style joy he starts with. Then look forward to his last paragraph, with its startling Advent ache. How could we not share that?

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce , for the editorial team

Pr. James West to Ed Schroeder—

1. Thank you for #803. Your words continue to liberate me from my servitude to the Deus Absconditus. Pure joy. Michael Novak's book, *Ascent of the Mountain – Flight of the Dove* was my gateway book to the realm of comparative religious studies. Having a last name beginning with W prevented my enrollment in the introductory studies class my freshman year. It was on the recommended reading list for precocious folk who wanted to read it during the summer before classes began. The mountain themes in the OT texts for Advent along with your book review brought clarity to that wee mountain named Zion to which all the nations stream. There is only one mountain that matters and it's easily missed when our sights are on those other purple mountain majesties.

2. My Love-Hate Relationship with Academic Study—Could it be our curved-in nature that inspires people to wrap themselves up in academic robes that keep out the chill of being proven wrong in matters concerning one's relationship to God? If one is "just" doing sociology, one is free to be brilliant, i.e., never wrong. One is "just" reporting the observable facts of human behavior. Woe be to one who not only stakes one's life on the God revealed to us in Christ Jesus crucified, but proclaims it in public in an academic journal as well as from a pulpit and the public square.

It happens in the congregation as well. I am working on equipping the members to visit the neighbors as members of a church seeking to learn what is on people's mind. At the congregational meeting, one member spoke up, "How many of you are willing to go out and do this? I just want you to know what you are agreeing to if you support this. I don't want to see this as setting us up for failure." I commend her honesty, don't say yes to something that you aren't willing to do. The anxiety beneath her statement is what if this doesn't work, where "work" is defined as "saving the congregation". A colleague has directed me to the literature on existential depression. At least it has a name. It sounds treatable.

My hate is directed toward the safety of the ivory tower, which isn't all that safe, and my love is directed to the academy that is able to call a thing what it really is. It is good to receive direction from the tower when in the midst of proclaiming the gospel to the believers, disbelievers, non-believers and those on the verge of believing because if it were true it would do. (St. Joseph (Sittler) of Chicago)

I'm waiting on the Lord to nail my desire for certitude on the cross. I wish that he would hurry up.

In Christ Jesus....