

AN ADVENT REFLECTION  
by George Rector

I would like to refer to one poet in order to introduce another. Wendell Berry, the Kentucky writer and farmer, once described God as “the wildest being in existence.” That was his way of saying that God will never be tamed, leashed or in any way confined, least of all by the limited reach of our words, particularly my words. But poetry, along with art and music, often has a directness which can sometimes allow us to more closely approach even so wild a being as God.

MAKING THE HOUSE READY FOR THE LORD  
Mary Oliver

Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but  
Still nothing is as shining as it should be  
For you. Under the sink, for example, is an  
Up roar of mice—it is the season of their  
Many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves  
And through the walls the squirrels  
Have gnawed their ragged entrances—but it is the season  
When they need shelter, so what shall I do? And  
The raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard  
While the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;  
What shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling  
In the yard and the fox who is staring boldly  
Up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will  
Come, Lord; you will, when I speak to the fox,  
The sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know  
That really I am speaking to you whenever I say,

As I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.

Advent is the season of the liturgical year in which we focus on quiet reflection, attempt to practice patience and anticipate that our current darkness will give way to a life-sustaining light. (I'm reminded how NOT to practice patience when I remember a customer's snappish complaint that Joan and I overheard years ago while on a field trip with students—"Five minutes is too long to wait for an Egg McMuffin, my friend!!" Instant gratification is the antithesis of Advent yet it seems to be one of the prominent features of our time. As such, observing Advent becomes a radical act because it asks us to live a quiet life in an increasingly restless world.)

This is also a time to remember that prayer, one of our foundational practices, is the attempt to enter a silence which allows us to hear another voice speak. In my own halting efforts of prayer it seems that what I usually hear (in my own exasperated voice, of course) is the question that Mary Oliver poses, "What shall I do?" Asking such a question, though, should help us to recognize that our lives are always lived in Advent. This is because we always have the possibility of emerging from the darkness of our ignorance and unknowing and entering the light of divine presence. As we repeat this cycle of unknowing darkness and understanding light we are reminded that Christ always has been and forever will be ever present in the daily events of our lives. Christ is present and ready to reveal himself, even when we are immersed in the darkness of our distractions, fears and shortcomings.

Another aspect of Mary Oliver's poem which makes it seem appropriate for Advent is the reference to the ordinary routines in which we all partake—making ready, sweeping and cleaning--- and how these common acts always have the potential to open a gateway through which we just might have a glimpse of divine presence. After all, Christ's arrival, we are taught, is always imminent even though we often seem to lose sight of that truth. That, I think, is why Mary Oliver says, acknowledging the imperfections of her own efforts, "And still I believe you will come, Lord." And I as I better learn to pray or as I am going about my daily work perhaps I will one day be allowed to hear that other voice speak and it will say "Come in, come in."

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December 5, 2018