

Advent IV December 23, 2012

This will be artificial, but it's the best I can do. "The crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth, and all flesh shall see it together." This may be my favorite Advent text, but how can I fill ten minutes with it? Two nights ago I heard in Handel's *Messiah* a South African tenor make those words electrifyingly alive, in the third movement (*Every valley shall be exalted*). His name was Sunnyboy Vladla. He was a serious singer, and that was not a nickname. It is spelled "sunny" like "sunny day," not "son of Mr Vladla." I wished I could develop this sensational detail. But I took Sunnyboy in spirit back to the text, and found the key words to be straight, smooth, see. The first letters make the same sound as Sunnyboy: this is the poetic device called alliteration. The letter S is curvy and crooked. The prophecy tells us that a crooked letter shall be made straight. Hmmm, there might be something there....

I began to ponder the Christmas stories, the joyful mysteries, to look for the S-words. With some stretching, I found some. I found ten. If one of them helps you think about Christmas, that is sufficient.

1. Sadness. We need Christmas because deep down we are sad. The fifth joyful mystery, the boy Jesus lost for three days, represents this. Life is a matter of sadness and loss. We don't like to believe this, and fortunately there is much mitigation, but in our heart-searching moments, we know sadness as a strong part of the mystery of existence. This is brought to the surface in such moments as the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut. The news media moves on to the next story, but the town can't, and if we stay connected with them (as, in prayer, we helplessly do), we don't either.

2. Separation. The lost boy Jesus reminds us that we grow away from our parents, and our children grow away from us. However deep the tie with our life partner, there is always some point of isolation and separation. This is healthy but it is hard.

3. Sword. At the presentation of Jesus in the temple, Simeon recognizes the baby as the future messiah. He will cause the fall and rise of many in Israel, a sign to be spoken against, and a sword will pierce your own heart also. The sword is a symbol of acute suffering, the times when "the iron enters your soul," and trauma shatters the surface. This leaves long-term scars. Things we don't get over, even if we stop talking

about them, and those around us think everything is fine. Even God's loving gaze does not remove the scars.

4. Sigh. To groan, to express hardship, to exhale with effort, to long for companionship. We notice this in Joseph, pushed to the fringe of the holy family, who never talks, never complains: he must sigh while leading that donkey. We notice this in Elizabeth, who when her husband is silent, has no one to talk to until Mary came. We sigh when we long for something beyond our reach.

The first four were low places, but Christmas should move us to high places. Mary hastened into the hill country because the valleys will be exalted.

5. Solitude. This is the beautiful place where we commune with the heart in secret. After the shepherds visit, after the boy Jesus was found, Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. What is initially incomprehensible must be mulled over slowly to be assimilated. That is the process by which we learn and discover and find joy.

6. Silence. When peaceful silence lay over all, in the middle of the night, your Word leapt down from the royal throne in heaven (Book of Wisdom 18:14). We apply this prophecy to the tradition of Jesus being born at midnight, but figuratively it applies to the spiritual midnight when Mary was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. Each of us is called to be receptive to God, to consent and conceive as she did, and we can only do this in silence.

7. Society. By this I do mean the teeming masses whose opinion is often absurd. I mean authentic connection between people. Out of silence and solitude comes the precious interaction of significant relationship. It is represented by the experience of two women in today's Gospel when Mary visits Elizabeth. It's not so much what is verbally said as what is communicated: in Newman's words, heart speaks to heart.

8. Sight. "Let us go now to Bethlehem, and see this thing which has happened which the Lord has made known to us....When the wise men saw the star, they were exceedingly glad." The shepherds want to know first-hand what they have heard about. The wise men make an arduous journey to see what they have read about.

9. Song. It's an interesting piece of trivia that scripture does not actually say the angels sang. "Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,

praising God and *saying*, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will.” But glad tidings of great joy cannot be expressed in words. We need people like Sunnyboy to express in the language of music what is too great for the mind, what must be heard in the heart.

Number 10 could be sacred; it could be savior. But I will cheat and use a C-word: celestial. I do *not* mean otherworldly or intangible like the cyber cloud. Rather, the celestial is the heavenly. Heaven is a real “place,” where God is, the state of being for which stars and planets is a metaphor. In Christmas, the celestial comes to earth, comes to us.

Sadness, separation, sword, and sighing. These hard things can be transformed, if not erased, by things that lift up: solitude, silence, society, sight, and song. Or, to put it another way, the crookedness of the letter S can be straightened into the letter L. L stands for Light, the kind that shines in darkness but which the darkness cannot overcome. The kind that makes us, at a deep level, “sunny people.”

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