

This month I had two special outings relating to the holy season. Like it or not, you will now hear all about them. Since each story has spoilers, I regret that unlike airlines we don't provide earplugs. First, friends took me to the Second Shepherds Play at the Folger Shakespeare Theater on Capitol Hill. The play comes from the middle ages, six centuries ago, pre-Shakespeare, but the language was easily understood. Such plays were performed in the town square. They dramatized the biblical stories in a way not possible during the Latin mass, which was incomprehensible to the ordinary person. They have entertaining material not strictly scriptural: good secular fun, music and dancing. This particular play is full of chattering shepherds, wonderfully "diverse." One has a grey beard; one has black skin; one is actually, if you look closely enough, an eightenn-year old girl; medievals were probably not uptight with transgender people. Eyes sparkling, she speaks at high speed, worrying about the wolf nearby, noticing the unusual star. Her seniors, like so many of us even at Christmas, are cynically unimpressed: pipe down; you're seeing things.

The best characters are Mac and Gill. He wears a beret and beard; she has frizzed up hair and an apron. Rule-breakers always get attention, as any earnest child knows, as we fearfully observe in current public life. The play's naughtiness was more innocent. Mac and Gill conspire to steal a sheep for themselves. When Mac brings it home, Gill puts it in the baby-cradle. A real baby is on the way; Gill's blustering earth-mother qualities will fill the house with fertility. Searching for the stolen sheep, the shepherds intelligently go to Mac and Gill, who deny everything. When the sheep bleats, Gill pretends to have heartburn. The shepherds scratch their heads. When they come near the cradle, they say "that doesn't *smell* like a baby." And so forth. Though simplistic, it is charming and funny, as life can be, if we pay attention.

Suddenly from the second-story ceiling the angel's gown drops gloriously down. There she is, stunningly beautiful, entrancing us with song, higher in grandeur than the simple folk-tunes we've heard so far. The shepherds hurry behind the star to the manger. This is inaccurate, scripture's star reserved for the magi. The rustic shepherds address the holy family, entirely themselves, yet eloquent as they offer gifts. Instead of a sheep there is a bunch of cherries from the girl, a live bird in the old man's hand, a toy ball from the dark-skinned shepherd. Later I looked up the meaning of the gifts. Cherries in winter signify life out of death, the paschal mystery; the bird is the Holy Spirit descending when John baptized Jesus; the ball, or orb, with a scepter, would show a king's authority. I prefer simpler interpretations. Gill, the housewife with heartburn, could tell the shepherds what a child really wants. Cherries are sweet, the ball is for games, a bird is something to love. Jesus was a real child living in a happy family with time to play.

My other Advent outing was to the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the mall. Our receptionist gave me a ticket, saying "now you owe me one"; those who know her will recognize she did not speak figuratively. I only did the bottom half, the history. You take a room-sized elevator, the size of this church, to a subterranean floor, then re-live history from the ground up. The slave trade was beginning in 1400, six hundred years ago, when the Second Shepherds Play premiered in the north of England. You see how people threw themselves off the slave ships to escape the appalling conditions onboard and waiting at their destination. You hear firsthand accounts of the slave block when a family was split up. Alongside this painful material, there are many bright spots. Dave the Potter, Priscilla's brilliant tailoring, those who sang and danced (like shepherds) after long hours in cotton fields. How did they do this? They were ordinary people who become fully human in that rare way that only

remarkable individuals do. They moved me as much as the history-book heroes: Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Mary Macleod Bethune, Malcolm X, Oprah Winfrey. You are enfolded in the amazing pageant struggling towards equality before it seems possible. It hardly seems possible now.

You solemnly file past the coffin of Emmett Till, the Chicago boy lynched in Alabama one month after I was born, September 1955. Fourteen years old! Killed by two adults, his eye ripped from its socket, face bashed in, body mutilated, for, maybe, a cheeky adolescent's wolf-whistle at a good-looking white woman. There is a televised interview with his mother. Forbidding the undertaker to touch up Emmet's body before she saw the animalistic evidence, she insisted on an open casket at a public funeral so people could not look the other way. The men accused were acquitted by an all-white jury. Three months later, when told to give up her seat Rosa Parks thought of what she saw. Emmett Till empowered her to stay seated and thus ignited the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Near the coffin was footage of the month-long Selma march by 25,000 people. It needed four-thousand federal troops to stop beatings by spectators, and limit killings by police to only three. An exhibit postscript explained how the voting-rights legislation inspired by this sacrifice was gutted forty-eight years later by the Roberts Supreme Court in 2013.

All this causes reflection on a strange, painful mystery. Out of terrible evil, strength, goodness, and courage can arise. This, the greatest spiritual truth of all, is shown to us preeminently in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It has happened again and again in human history. Even so, the greatest victories can be reversed. At times St Paul felt that Christ had died for nothing. The intimidating yet glorious conclusion is that strength, goodness, courage can rise up, after defeat, once more to battle, as in our present time of crisis. We must be the Christs to bring the paschal mystery into the world when things look dark.

What most affected me was the video of Daisy Bates. In 1957 she masterminded the integration of Little Rock Central High School. You have seen the National Guard escort that young girl clutching her books into the building. Actually six girls and three boys were chosen for their scholarship. The screaming and spitting did not stop once they got in. Name-calling and abuse continued all year; acid was thrown in one girl's face. So, Miss Bates, the interviewer asked, was all the pain and suffering worth it? Elegantly smoothing down her crinoline skirt, she said, "You have only to look in their *faces* and see the triumph. You know it was worth it." The video cut to the photo of nine faces smiling out at us from the sofa. In this crowded museum you can stop when overcome by a sense of human greatness, and you need not be African-American to feel included. I felt like the people on slave ships, down below, were watching the Little Rock Nine at this upper level. Certainly Emmett Till watched Rosa Parks stay seated. I felt like Barack Obama, not yet born when the throng crossed the Montgomery Bridge on Bloody Sunday, had somehow seen the event he, the Bushes, and hundreds of others would commemorate fifty years later. I pondered such inter-connectedness which Christians term the communion of saints.

In Advent we "watch for the day when we see the face." As the Christmas hymn says, "born of Mary full of grace, the world's redeemer showed his sacred face." The face reveals the inner person. The face shows pain; the face shows joy. Two sides co-exist in a face if we look deeply enough. Thus you see absurdity and solemnity, interlinked, in the characters of the Second Shepherds Play. It is upsetting to witness the two sides in Emmet Till. The enchanting high spirits, the inconceivable battering inflicted. Then consider how his death became a crucial patch in the tapestry leading to the Little Rock Nine. Those young faces strong

enough to wear down opponents. I thought of changes in the face of Jesus: cherubic infant, to awkward adolescent, to zealous young preacher, to agonized victim, to glorious savior in the resurrection. We go as shepherds to the manger of Bethlehem expecting only to find the baby. When we get there we see the whole sequence. A holy day like Christmas is like a visit to a virtuosic museum. We take the experience home with us. When we visit Christ, we, silly shepherds, do not leave him in the Bethlehem manger. We take him home with us, so that over time we change from our superficial characters, and become serious agents in the struggle for salvation.

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