

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12

Turning

A few years ago, I heard the writer Minna Proctor read from her nonfiction short stories —“true stories,” she calls them. After the reading, someone asked her what the difference was between teaching students how to write fiction and teaching them to write nonfiction. Proctor replied that fiction writers are taught to make their work more “richly imagined” while nonfiction writers are taught to make theirs more “richly observed.”

She went on to describe for us an exercise that she had learned as a student to strengthen both capacities. If you want to write about something happening in a room, real or imaginary, she said, you have to enter it and turn all the way around inside it, asking: what does this room look like? What does it smell like? How warm or cool is it? Where do the light and the shadows fall? What’s the feeling in the room, the atmosphere? Who’s in the room and what’s in the room and what is the shape of the space between them?

That was the writing exercise: You start in one place, she said, and begin turning, gathering up everything you can see or imagine, until you return to the point at which you began. And then you do it again, in order to find out what you missed the first time. And then you do it again. And then, she said, you do it again. Because no matter how richly we observe or imagine the world around us, there will always be things that elude us. It will always be worth turning around

again, because there will always be something more to encounter, even if we can't find the words to describe it.

This writing exercise could also be an Advent exercise: turning toward the world with the patient gaze of the artist seeking to describe life as she finds it. To turn and turn and turn again toward the world in which we wait for Christ to be born. For no matter how many times we turn through the Advent stories of John the Baptist shouting himself hoarse in the desert and angels turning up in the ordinary places where people live and work, there is always something else to find, because the stories themselves are born into a *new* world each year and gather up both its sorrows and its joys.

This afternoon, the University Choir will perform a new carol written by our composer-in-residence, Carson Cooman. It's called "The Pilgrimage Carol" and it describes the way we turn again and again through the stories of Advent and Christmas each year. "I am again, pilgrim of the year past, among the kingdom of your birth," the choir will sing this afternoon. "I brush the shoulders of kings, shepherds. I am here."

If last week, we were invited by Jesus's teachings on last things to begin our Advent journey at the *end*, John the Baptist, this week, urges us to turn. "Repent," he cries in the wilderness in the lesson Jimmy read for us, "for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

The Greek word being translated as "repent" here means something like: to change one's mind. But the Hebrew word used by the prophets in whose footsteps John is very deliberately

following, means something more embodied — not just to change one’s mind but to change one’s *direction*, to turn. Turn around, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.

Turning may be the quintessential gesture of Advent. Mary turns, perplexed, toward the angel who greets her in the midst of an ordinary day and asks him, “how can these things be?” Mary’s friend Elizabeth turns toward her when Mary turns up like an angel herself in Elizabeth’s home and makes the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leap with joy — its own kind of turning. Jesus turns toward John the Baptist in the wilderness and places his body in John’s startled hands to be baptized. And John calls us, pilgrims of the year past, to change our direction and catch the rhythm of this turning: to repent, and begin again.

When Dorothy Austin, the former faculty dean of Lowell House, was a minister in this church, she invited me one year to give a morning prayers talk every day during the first week of Advent. I was working on a commentary on the Song of Songs, that little book of erotic love poetry at the heart of the Bible, and so I tried to think about the Song as a kind of Advent poem. There’s part of the Song of Songs in which one lover comes looking for the other in the night, knocking on her door while she sleeps. “I slept,” she says, “but my *heart* was awake.” And that part of her that is awake hears the knock.

This is one kind of Advent turning: to be led by the part of us that is awake and waiting, even if that part is infinitesimally small, even when we feel more scattered than present in our own lives, even when we are distracted by many things, even when we are asleep. The voices from the wilderness in Advent address themselves to the most wakeful part of ourselves and encourage us

to be led by it. Repent, turn, John the Baptist cries, for the kingdom of heaven has come near—not like a train that we catch on its way through town or miss forever, but like a knock we can barely hear or something we can see only from the corner of our eye — a glimpse of the kingdom that we will have to imagine as well as observe.

Other forms of turning are more deliberate. If you’ve been in Harvard Yard this past week, you’ve seen our striking graduate student workers turning together in a spirited picket line between Mass Hall and University Hall, chanting “No Justice, No Peace,” “No Contract, No Peace.” In the snow, in the sleet, they’ve been out there every day, turning together around the Yard and inviting others to join them.

One of the points of a picket line, of course, is to wear down barriers to negotiation, to keep pressure on the employer until they come back to the table. I don’t know how that’s going. But I do feel that each turn of the picket line is wearing down barriers. Because as our students turn around the Yard, their lives become more visible — not just their lives as the brilliant students we rely on to run discussion sections for our classes and grade our students’ papers, but their lives as people with doctor’s appointments and child care bills and rent to pay. The turning of the picket line is another kind of Advent turning—a deliberate movement toward change [...] that illuminates our shared humanity and our common human needs. No matter where we stand on any particular point of negotiation, the turning of the picket line is an incarnational turning that makes a claim on us as a community.

The reading from Isaiah that Lily read for us today makes a similar claim, offering a vision of the future that calls us not only to observe what *is* but to imagine what might yet be. Year after year Isaiah's words are part of our Advent pilgrimage. His vision of a leader who will always judge in favor of the poor and the meek of the earth, a world in which the wolf and the lamb, the cow and the bear, the lion and the ox shall eat together and lie down in safety together is not the kind of vision that is available for our observation and study. But it is the kind of vision we might glimpse from the corner of our eye as we move through our lives, and certainly as we move through Advent which is rich with visions of a world without violence, without poverty, without war. "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain," God says, "for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea."

If our imaginations were shaped by this vision, what would we observe as we turn and turn and turn again through the rooms of our lives like an artist seeking to find the words for what she can see *before* her and also the unknowable more that she knows she has missed?

The voices that reach us during Advent urge us turn our gaze to the *margins* of these rooms and of the world beyond them. The lives the prophets both richly observe and richly imagine are the lives of those who live there: survivors of violence, people scattered into exile, the poor and the meek of the earth. The gospel writers also turn our gaze toward figures who live and work on the edges, figures they move to the center of their stories: the shepherds who work while others sleep; the young unwed mother who, upon hearing difficult news from an angel, makes haste to visit her friend Elizabeth; and her friend Elizabeth, who believes her. Angels and prophets make dramatic appearances but mostly they help us turn toward the mystery that is already present in

the lives of the ordinary people in this story. This mystery pours out of their lives like a blessing, illuminating the excess presence in the world that waits to reveal itself and make itself felt as we turn through this season.

John the Baptist calls us this morning to repent, to change direction, to turn and to keep turning. Because the call to turn won't end with the coming of Christmas; the call to turn will never end. There is always more to be observed and imagined in every glimpse of God's kingdom, in every turn of the picket line, in every gesture of welcome—more than we will ever comprehend. Our Advent turnings, like all our turnings, are grounded in the inexhaustible mystery of our humanity, of the possibility of transformation, and of the God in whom we live and move and have our being, a mystery which can always be more richly observed and even more richly imagined.

Amen.

