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# The First Sunday of Advent

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Devotional  
The First Sunday of Advent  
December 3, 1989

Malachi 3:1-3, Psalm 46:1-3; Luke 15:11-13, 17-24

The story of the Prodigal Son, familiar as it is, has taken on new meaning for me this Christmas season. The change occurred quite by accident and very scripturally, for the things of childhood occasioned it. In this case, the change was wrought by a toy soldier.

Christmas is a time of figures: manger scenes, Santas, reindeer, snowmen, and toys galore. The kaleidoscope of images sometimes blurs and blends the shapes together, juxtaposing unlikely elements. Just as Christ's mingling with the world showed us unfamiliar images and instructed us through them, so God instructs us today in the same manner.

Malachi portends God's Messenger as refiner and judge; the Psalmist reminds us that we may "abide the day of his coming" only in the God who is "our refuge and our strength." Against that background, Luke recounts strange images: the great catch of fishes, Jesus healing the leper, and friends lowering a palsied man through a roof into the Messiah's healing presence. The Child whose coming we celebrate is a man of paradox personally living out the unlikely and unusual.

For me, this Child-figure promises something to the Prodigal Son in all of us. We're familiar with the image of the prodigal's return to his father. But this Christmas my manger scene will have an addition to the usual complement of animals, shepherds, and wise men around the Holy Family. This year a toy soldier will join the others in representation of the prodigal whose

redemption came through the sacrifice of the Child in the manger. And my toy soldier holds a grenade.

As this Advent season begins, let us see the image of the prodigal son at the manger. Let us join him in reviewing our past, realizing our present, and resolving to go in humility, repentance, and rejoicing to the manger.

PRAYER: Lord, help us to come in repentance during this season, approaching the manger in reverent joy and thanksgiving as we do the cross—seeing in each Your forgiveness for our prodigal ways. Amen.

Ray Granada

Devotional

The Second Wednesday of Advent

December 13, 1989

Mark 3:20; Psalm 50:1-6; Isaiah 11:1-5, 12

Mark speaks of a multitude, the Psalmist of judgment. The heart of this Advent lesson lies in the distillation of those two in Isaiah's striking imagery, a prophetic vision which foresees a rod of Jesse's stem bringing the spirit of the Lord—wisdom and understanding, counsel and right, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. The rod "does not judge after the sight of his eyes, or reprove after the hearing of his ears." The usual criteria of judgment are exchanged for righteousness. Hurt and destruction disappear as the earth fills with "the knowledge of the Lord." Utopia arrives, ushered in by a little child.

How can a child lead us to eschew judgment based on our senses? Nothing is more literal than a child. Children question based on a literal interpretation of what they see and hear. Perhaps the most familiar words an adult hears are "but you SAID...", or "but how can...."

How can a child lead us to eschew hurt and destruction? Children can be thoughtless, heartless, and vicious. One of my favorite western movie scenes shows a band of hard-bitten, vicious killers riding into town while children play in the street. The viewer knows that these poor innocent children will be hurt in the inevitable gunfight; the urge to holler "Watch out! Run!" is almost overpowering. The camera plays on the circle of children laughing while the horsemen approach. Then the camera reveals the nature of the children's play as it takes the viewer into the circle. Those innocent children

have a scorpion trapped, and are deviling it with sticks while delighting in its torture. The children in the circle share the horsemen's viciousness; only their ages differ.

How can a vicious young literalist lead a multitude to embrace knowledge of the Lord and His righteousness? Surely the wisdom of age offers more insight into a special kind of judgment! Yet age renders us more immune to wonders. As Lt. Joseph Cable, USMC, warns in "South Pacific," we've got to be carefully taught to hate. Increasingly we rely on our senses as we have used them before. We would never abjure natural enemies to lie down together, for we KNOW the impossibility of the task. We've learned too well to judge what we see with our eyes and decide by what we hear with our ears!

Youth and age differ in their willingness to experience wonder and welcome things our senses and past experience tell us cannot be. The cruelty of youth lies in the lack of experience, its literalness in desire to learn. Youth asks "why can this not be?"; age answers "because I have seen and heard that it cannot." Advent brings God to earth in human form, arriving as a child to bring us the good news that God's righteousness can change what we see and hear, can change our world, can change us. And only a Child could tell us that.

Prayer: Lord, help us this day to surrender our inadequate ability to judge based on our senses, remembering that you instructed us not to judge, and to listen instead to your promptings toward a righteousness which avoids hurt and destruction in ourselves and those around us.

Ray Granada