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| **Three companions for the Advent journey** |
| http://www.catholicireland.net/pages/images/transp.gif |
| *James Wallace C.Ss.R. proposes that we take three model characters as our 'companions' for Advent: John the Baptist, the prophet Isaiah, and the Blessed Virgin Mary.* |
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| Advent is a time of year when many people lay claim to our heart. There are the family and friends for whom we search out gifts, the loved one with whom we make yearly contact by long messages on a card, and those strangers - the poor, the homeless, the battered - whose desperate needs cry out more loudly at this time than at any other.  **Generosity and self-sacrifice** The stories of the season call us to generosity and self-sacrifice, from Ebenezer Scrooge's transformation wrought by three visiting spirits to Menotti's young Amahl, who offers his crutch to the wiseman to give to the One they find under the star, to O. Henry's young married lovers who sacrifice their most precious possessions so each might express love for the other. The season calls us to open our heart so Christ might take on our flesh and be born again in and through each of us.  Yet sometimes the call to open one's heart is not easily answered. The weeks leading up to Christmas, when believers celebrate the season of Advent, can evoke a variety of feelings. With all the emphasis on celebrating the joy of the season with others, dark shadows can threaten. For some, it is a time of sadness because of losses life has dealt them through death, sickness or broken relationships. For some, the grip of depression takes hold with greater ferocity than at any other time of the year. And perhaps others can see another year slipping away with life's dreams no closer to achievement, indeed with a sense of even greater separation from their realisation. It is not a season to be alone, as if any season is. More to the-point, it is a season to grow in our awareness of presence, not only of family and friends but of the God who calls us to live in intimacy, a time to know both our emptiness and the nearness of the One who can fill and fulfill us.  To this end, we are given three "family members" to be with us during the weeks of Advent: John the Baptist, Isaiah the prophet, and Mary the expectant mother. Each speaks to us about matters of the heart, about longing and fulfilment and hope. They are companions for our Advent journey. Every year they playa prominent role in our Advent scripture readings. I would like to draw your attention to the particular way they come to us this year.  **The dynamic John** John the Baptist makes two appearances every Advent, on the second and third Sundays. What is interesting this year is the contrast between the two portraits. The gospel for the second Sunday gives us the John we are most familiar with - a lone figure in the desert, dressed in animal skin, eating bugs and honey, shouting himself hoarse about the need to turn from sin, and plunging all who got within a foot of him into the Jordan to scour clean whatever had stained their goodness.  This is the John who does not have a moment of self-doubt or questioning, hurling his words at the local leaders. "Bunch of snakes," he shouts, "give me proof you are going to change." Not exactly someone you would want to run into while you .were out Christmas shopping.  And if you thought he was tough, it didn't take long for him to tell you he was only the warm-up for the main act. The One who is coming would sweep with a very big broom, and all who got caught in the bristles would be thrown into the fire. No more weeds in the garden - this One would take an axe to their roots. The John we first meet brings to mind the words of the novelist Flannery O'Connor that "to the hard of hearing, you shout, and for the almost blind, you have to draw in large and startling figures."  **John at a loss** It can come as a surprise on the third Sunday when we are presented with a very different John. Some time has passed in the gospel, and John has been put into prison because of what he has been saying about King Herod and his wife. But John now seems at a loss. He has been hearing different things about Jesus, and he doesn't know what to make of it all. He has heard that Jesus hangs out with prostitutes and those tax collectors who work for the hated Romans. He has heard that Jesus goes to parties and entertains the crowds with stories. Where is the firebrand who was going to dean up the place. The scourge of God? The One he spent the last 10 years whipping everyone into shape for? Perhaps this John is the one we can more readily identify with, especially during Advent. One who is tired, just about hanging on, not sure if he has the will to keep at it. A person who has been hit hard by doubt and feels disoriented, at a loss as to what his life has been about. So he sends a message to Jesus: "Are you the One we have been waiting for? Should we look for someone else one more time?" You can hear the desperation in his words.  This John is our companion when we are desperately waiting for something to make things dear in our life. When we sit in the silence of our prisons, feeling vulnerable, wondering if it has been worth it. Whether the "it" is a job, a relationship, a marriage, or life itself, John joins us in our uncertainty, our doubts, and sits with us. He is a companion to us in the darkness of depression while we wait for the light to pierce what seems impenetrable.  **An exuberant Isaiah** What can a prophet who lived seven hundred years before Jesus say to us on the verge of the 21st century? Isaiah was both a politician and a poet, and his words fly across the centuries with the power to lift us out of our confining visions of what life is all about and where we are all headed. (In ancient times too, Isaiah's spirit was contagious, because part of the Book of Isaiah is written by others whose names we do not even know, one of whom we call "Second Isaiah," a man who wrote 150 years later, when Israel was in exile, and whom we hear on the third Sunday).  Isaiah's images tumble over one another in their exuberance. His is the most frequently heard voice of the Advent season, not only on Sundays but on many of the weekdays. We are given Isaiah as a companion who turns us toward the future, that blank slate beyond our sight that can fill us with fear and anxiety. Just as John speaks to us when we are wearied by what has happened, Isaiah speaks to our deepest unfulfilled longings for peace, security, and deep joy.  **A world of peace** Advent always begins with the call to "Keep awake... don't be caught napping... be ready to welcome the Lord Jesus, who will come to judge." This second coming of Jesus can seem so distant that we dismiss it or it can fill us with fear at the thought of the coming judgment. Isaiah reminds us that this period, called the "end time," is going to be a time of great joy. Even before Jesus was born, he had glimpses of what it was going to be like when God's rule came forth.  "You know what it's going to be like," Isaiah explodes, looking off into the distance. "Well, picture this terrific party, a huge party, and everyone is streaming into this mansion on a mountain. People from everywhere, all the peoples of the Americas and Asia and Africa and Australia and the most distant, forsaken spots - all those little islands that dot the globe - they're all coming. And those weapons that people need to protect themselves, from small pistols to the most deadly nuclear devices, all will be melted down into farm equipment for the garden. No more gang wars, no more senseless shootings, no more bloodbaths to protect national or multinational interests ever again."  Isaiah sings to us of a world in which there will be peace, in which the air will be clean, the flowers will bloom, the city streets will no longer be exploding with violence or drug killings, a place where the lamb and the wolf, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion, can partner one another. He speaks of a waiting that will give birth to a new age that exceeds our most exorbitant dreams. He is difficult to believe. Maybe that's why we hear him more often than anyone else during Advent, so his visions can gently sparkle like stars strewn across the night sky, giving us direction and comfort during the darkest hours.  In a world where there is so much violence and injustice of all kinds, we are called to remember Isaiah's image of dead stump sprouting a shoot that will bud and blossom into new life. Isaiah summons us to wait for joy.  **Mary in peril** The season of Advent builds to its presentation of Mary. Because of our familiarity with the gospel on the fourth Sunday, we may have become hardened to the seriousness of what is happening here. Joseph is about to divorce Mary because he presumes she has committed adultery. Mary has been found to be pregnant before she and Joseph have lived together as husband and wife. Joseph is described as "an upright man," which means he lived as an observer of the Law of Moses. Taken strictly, this Law demanded that anyone who committed adultery should be stoned.  There was a more lenient" out" that could be taken, and that was a quiet divorce. This is what Joseph was going to do. Because he was a merciful man, he was not going to have a public trial in which Mary would be accused of her crime. The gospel tells us that "he was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace." We might wonder how much comfort this would have given to a very young pregnant Jewish woman. At this point, fortunately, Joseph has a dream. More fortunately, he listens to it.  **Mary's silent hope** Though our attention is centred on Joseph, Mary is equally central - the silent, pregnant Mary. She is present as one waiting in hope for God to act. For there is no other means to go on with life, drawing on the inner strength, the presence of the living God. It alerts us to the possibility of facing total darkness in a spirit of hope. Angels come in God's good time.  The pregnant Mary reminds us that new life comes at its own rate of growth, according to laws that do not yield to a desire for quick results. She speaks to all of us caught up in a fast-paced world. In a culture that disposes quickly of what isn't working, that has little patience with either fragility or weakness, Mary reminds us that we have to wait for some things.  Like her, we may be called to witness to a God who works in the fullness of time, which can be excruciatingly slow for those who live by a schedule. But God proves to be a God of new life, a God who is Emmanuel, God-with-us.  Advent presents us with three companions. Each speaks to us of waiting - in desperation, in excitement, in silent hope. During a season when we can become easily frazzled and anxious about many things, when loneliness and loss can threaten to overwhelm us, we can know that we are not alone. We have with us, among others, a faith-filled trio who point toward an abiding Presence who continues to breathe the divine Spirit into us, bringing to new birth sons and daughters of the living God. |