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HAPHAZARD BY STARLIGHT

A poem a day from Advent to Epiphany



Janet Morley

SPCK

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Introduction



Almighty God,
give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness
and put upon us the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility;
that in the last day
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge both the quick and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit,
now and for ever.

Collect for Advent Sunday (BCP 1662)

The themes of the season

Advent, like Lent, is a time of waiting. It is a preparation time for Christmas and the mystery of the Incarnation, just as Lent prepares for Holy Week and the mystery of the resurrection at Easter. In both periods, Christians have traditionally practised prayer, fasting and self-examination, and reflected on some quite penitential themes before the period of feasting and celebration. It is worth seeking to spend time with the themes that belong with Advent. They are not all comfortable, but can provide a welcome and realistic contrast with the glitzy and occasionally exhausting merriment of the commercial Christmas that is sold to us. And the period can thereby lead us into a deeper and more grounded sense of joy and mystery.

The collect for Advent Sunday sets a tone that is both expectant and somewhat fearful. It looks forward to the nativity, when Jesus Christ ‘came to visit us in great humility’. The phrase recalls

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the ancient Christian poem in Philippians 2 in which God's self-emptying love in becoming human is proclaimed, and it recalls the Old Testament God who 'visits' or pitches his tent among us. But the expectation is surrounded with images of struggle, mortality and judgement. To recall the child at Bethlehem is also to recall the end time when Christ will 'come again in his glorious majesty' to hold to account the living and the dead. And a profound battle is announced between the works and forces of darkness and the light that is to come; there is a sense that we must engage with death in order to understand the nature of eternal life.

In the northern hemisphere it is significant that the period of Advent coincides with the time of year when the days are becoming ever shorter and darkness predominates as we come towards the solstice. Often the weather is extremely cold, or at least filthy and unpredictable, and travel may be difficult or even dangerous. Winter illnesses are on the increase and death is more common in the elderly. Poverty becomes harder to endure as fuel is both necessary and costly. Whereas in Lent the spring is gradually making itself felt, in Advent plants, trees and wildlife are retreating into their winter dormancy, in the effort to survive the time of greatest austerity. And then, it is no coincidence that we have chosen to celebrate the birth of the saviour, the coming of light into the world, at the time of year when for countless generations humans have celebrated the return of the sun, announcing the turn of the year and the expectation of growing daylight and warmth.

As well as considering apocalyptic themes, it is a time to reflect on some of the key people at the heart of the traditional stories – those on earth who were willing to cooperate with heaven for the sake of our salvation. Central among these is Mary, and the story of the annunciation and her willingness to accept rejection and danger in order to bear the holy child takes centre stage. It is interesting to see how many poets have focused on the encounter between Mary and the angel, the poignant human experience at the heart of it, and the parallels that can be drawn with 'annunciations' that we too may experience.

The event at the centre of Christmas – the birth of an infant in humble circumstances – is full of an intimate sort of awe, but it

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also reminds us of the precarious conditions of our mortality. As anyone who has ever given birth can testify, this joyful occasion is only achieved through fear and pain, and a heightened sense of the dangers that surround our fragile human life. The nativity story conveys not just glory and hope, but threat and suffering, political danger and the need to take flight. The slaughter of the children by Herod follows hard after Christmas Day, and the period includes the feast of Christianity's first martyr, the deacon Stephen. Traditionally, carols that rejoice in the birth of the infant Christ also see the shadow of his death foretold – the cradle and the cross are reflected in each other. As we move to the feast day of the Epiphany, the Church celebrates how the whole drama of salvation was shown forth to the Gentiles, represented by the foreign seekers known as the magi or the kings.

A number of Christian poets have consciously drawn on this mixture of themes, or highlighted some paradoxical elements, linking the Christian narrative with our own lives in time. Others without a religious intent have nevertheless explored themes that are suggested by the Advent period, or engage with winter and the turning of the year in ways that concur with Christian meditation in this season.

There was a poem made

In the days of Caesar, when his subjects went to be reckoned,
there was a poem made, too dark for him (naive with power) to
read.

It was a bunch of shepherds who discovered
in Bethlehem of Judah, the great music beyond reason and
reckoning.

Waldo Williams, translated from the Welsh by Rowan Williams

Why is poetry a particularly suitable literary form for meditating on the mystery of the Incarnation? In the poem chosen for Christmas Eve, the Welsh poet Waldo Williams uses a bold metaphor to convey this mystery. He speaks of it as a poem made by God in the world, noticed by 'a bunch of shepherds' but 'too dark' for the powers that

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be to comprehend. The image uses the fact that poetry is allusive and subtle, even when it is on the surface deceptively simple or even conversational. Poetry yields its multi-layered meanings only when the reader pays attention, and spends time reflecting on what may be a very few words. Intuition and a certain humility are needed, along with a willingness to notice properly the detailed world that the poem illuminates, and perhaps to be personally transformed by the resulting insights. As readers we have to bring some deep parts of ourselves into the process of interpretation; we have to surrender to the poem. At the same time, a poem doesn't browbeat the reader: it intrigues, challenges and delights.

Nothing could be further from the method of poetry than the plain-spoken 'executive summaries' that are commonly the only sort of document the powerful players in our world have time to consult. But it is very like the method God seems to choose in relating to humankind. Like the Incarnation, poetry is located in the 'scandal of particularity' and draws its power from this. It is similarly appreciated most readily by those who themselves are not too busy or important to attend to the details of what is going on. People are not usually moved or touched by generalizations, but by concrete image, story, presence. The eternal is best captured for contemplation in a 'grain of sand' (Blake), or in a tiny baby. So there is a sense in which the making of a poem reflects the action of the Word of God who was made particular flesh in our world at Christmas. The poetic approach goes deep into the way we are made, as well as the way God typically is able to be heard by us. As Rowan Williams put it in his 2012 lecture to the Waldo Williams Society: 'The enterprise of poetry is taking us to the level of primordial language, primitive language; ultimately, the word of God – the speech which underlies our humanity, indeed our very being.'

Poetry is a powerful image for what we ourselves may become in the hands of God, as we respond to his love in Christ. Waldo Williams' poem ends with the stunning image of God as poet, not only fashioning the great 'music beyond reason and reckoning' of the Incarnation, but also remaking us into beautiful and telling poetry ourselves. It is as if God needs our responsive hearts in order to compose the great

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hymn of praise, inhabited by the whole creation: 'He seeks us out as wordhoard for his workmanship, the laureate of heaven.'

This book is an attempt to join in with this divine, creative impulse.

How to use this book

Haphazard by Starlight is written with the individual reader in mind, taking a daily path through the Advent and Christmas period, up to Epiphany. It can obviously be read as it is laid out day by day. But it is important to remember that there exists no 'canon' or agreed 'lectionary' of suitable poems to reflect on during this time of year. The chosen sequence is intuitive (and when I compared it with a friend's independent selection of poetry for exactly the same devotional exercise, we found only one overlap in our choices). So you may prefer sometimes to find your own poems that work for you in this season; or perhaps my choices will introduce you to poets whose work you are prompted to explore further. My commentaries are my own readings of the poems, but every reader will find more to say, and will sometimes disagree with points made by me.

The book could also be used in a group meeting during Advent, but very few groups would be likely to convene during the Christmas period itself. Perhaps an Epiphany meeting could look back over the poems chosen around Christmas. Inevitably, readers would need to use the material in a devotional way individually first, and compare notes. But precisely because poems benefit greatly from being read aloud, and because one person on their own will seldom mine all the treasure of meaning in a text, there is a lot to be said for creating a reading group to get the most out of *Haphazard by Starlight*. Here are some suggested ways of grouping poems and comparing them (there are many others):

- **Autumn** (Advent Calendar; November Sonnet; Autumn's Fall; Shadows)
- **Searching** (The Other; The Absence; Church Going)
- **Fear** (Dover Beach; Ozymandias; The Second Coming; The Tyger)

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- **Darkness and light** (We grow accustomed to the Dark; Darkness; Blackbird in Fulham)
- **Annunciation** (Black Rook in Rainy Weather; The Bat; Annunciation; The Annunciation; The Visitation; Northumbrian Sequence, 4)
- **Winter celebration** (At the Winter Solstice; Ode to Winter; seasonal *ghazal*)
- **Nativity** (In the Days of Caesar; BC:AD; A Christmas Carol; Christmas)
- **Birth, suffering and death** (Innocent's Song; Song for a Winter Birth; Musée des Beaux Arts; The Year's Midnight; Journey of the Magi)
- **Vulnerability and care** (Agnus Dei; Woman to Child)
- **Hope** ('Ring out, wild bells'; Winter Paradise; God's Grandeur)

1 December



Advent Calendar

He will come like last leaf's fall.
One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to bone, and earth
wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like frost.
One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself
arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.
One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.

Rowan Williams

The poem is called 'Advent Calendar' – the traditional way to mark the progress of December towards Christmas Day – and it shows the movement of time through its length. Starting at the end of

'He will come like child'

November, it is clearly deep December by the third stanza. The landscape and the weather become progressively colder, darker and more wintry, as the poem charts the very end of autumn, with its mounds of choking leaf mould, moving to hard frosts, early sunsets, deep darkness and the expectation of snow. Throughout this sequence, there is the insistently repeated phrase – almost a cry – ‘He will come’. It is a kind of promise, like a response to the ancient Christian liturgical call ‘Maranatha – come, Lord Jesus!’, or the hymn ‘O come, O come Emmanuel’. But the chilling images of *how* he will come make the promise sound fearful rather than reassuring.

‘Like last leaf’s fall’ – this is the silent and unnoticed moment when autumn passes finally into winter and the deciduous trees no longer retain any sign of their summer life. Their trunks and branches are fully exposed and bare, but the poet intensifies the image by using the language of torture to describe how the wind has ‘flayed the trees to bone’. The idea of the trees having ‘bones’ starts to depict the landscape itself as instinct with human life, something that is reiterated in the image of the earth waking, choked with leaves. The imagery of ‘choking on the mould’, and ‘the soft shroud’, following the language of flaying, reiterate the sinister and life-threatening atmosphere of this wintry scene. The deceptively gentle words like ‘soft’ and ‘folding’ are applied not to a blanket of leaves, but to a shroud for a corpse. At this stage there is no explicit mention of the human community who have to navigate the world during the ravages of winter; instead, human reactions have been imputed to the natural world. Human struggles are suggested without needing to be mentioned, but we have a growing sense of the created world being itself identified with human violence, suffering, and the need for redemption.

The second stanza does nothing to dispel this impression. Here, the hard frost surprises a wakening earth which shrinks to find itself ‘arrested’. The choice of words brilliantly conveys the actual qualities of frost: leaf litter does actually shrink and curl, and then set hard and motionless – arrested – as the moisture content within it is frozen. But the language is that of fear and of being brutally awoken by a dawn raid, to be taken into custody. There is a kind of beauty, as there is with deep frost, but it is frightening, like a strange kind of

1 December

imprisonment. The landscape is caught ‘in the net/ of alien, sword-set beauty’. There are nets, and swords – we are in the arena of life and death combat.

The third stanza, about the promise of the dark, is a bit more playful, though even here the atmosphere is odd and sinister. It describes a wintry sunset, where the ball of the sun looks red and huge as it slides towards the horizon. But the size of the sun is indicated by the word ‘bursting’ – again there is the feeling that something terrifying, like an explosion, could be about to happen. The swift sunset is conveyed by suggesting that the sun is drawing up the earth over its face like a mask, like a child playing peep-bo with a bed sheet. Or it could suggest the way one draws a sheet over the face of someone who has just died. The stanza ends with some more cold beauty – the ‘star-snowed fields of sky’. Again there is repeated transfer of meanings, intensifying the sense of strangeness, as the stars are compared to thick snowflakes and the sky itself has ‘fields’. The effect is to suggest snow when it is not yet snowing (but it will), and that the fields beneath the sky are caught up with it as the kingdom of the dark becomes complete.

So we reach the final stanza, which initially refuses to reveal the image, which we are now expecting, of how ‘he will come’. But then there is a terrible list. It will be fearful: ‘like crying in the night’, ‘like blood’, ‘like breaking’. The image is of the earth ‘writhing’ with pain. The previous verses have led us to anticipate the worst, and yet it suddenly becomes apparent that this is not combat, or arrest, or torture, or imprisonment; it is childbirth. This, of course, typically involves crying, and blood, and breaking, and writhing – ‘he will come like child’. The omission of the article somehow emphasizes the routine ordinariness of how babies are born. But strangely, it is shockingly unexpected when we think about the coming of the Christchild.

The mood of this poem could hardly be further from the sentimentality that is commonly found in our Christmas celebrations. But the tone is absolutely traditional for Advent. The Christchild will come, but not until the world is at its darkest, and there will be struggle and violence surrounding the event. The preparation involves a stripping down, a facing of fear, and an acceptance of the dark. It

'He will come like child'

will be both utterly ordinary and yet apocalyptic. There is a sense of the second coming of Christ implicit in our forthcoming celebration of the first coming. And the earth itself wrestles with us to greet redemption. In the words of St Paul, 'the whole creation has been groaning together in travail until now' (Romans 8.22). Only through the pain of a crucial childbirth will the agonies of human conflict and violence be addressed.

As we enter the season of Advent, what is the balance in your heart between hope and fear?

2 December



November Sonnet

Spirit of place. Spirit of time. Re-form
The rugged oaks and chestnuts. Now they stand
Naked and pallid giants out of storm
And out of sorts. It is the Autumn's end

And this is Winter brought in by All Saints
Fast followed by All Souls to keep us in
Touch with chill and death. Each re-acquaints
Us with the year's end. Yet we now begin

A life of realism, watching out
For a red sunset, grateful for a dawn
Of rich light now. Tall shadows step and strut

Facing the big wind daily coming on
Faster. This is the season of right doubt
While that elected child waits to be born.

Elizabeth Jennings

Like the previous poem by Rowan Williams, this one is set on the cusp of autumn's end as it moves into winter. It is constructed as a traditional sonnet: the first eight lines propose the theme, and then there is a subtle turn into the last six lines, which offer some interpretation of the theme. The poet mostly uses the formal conventions of the sonnet, but also varies them. She creates unexpected gaps between lines, disrupting their expected rhythm and line endings, and eventually loosening the severe rhyme scheme of the first half, rather as the November wind in the poem reshapes and unsettles the trees.

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the ancient Christian poem in Philippians 2 in which God's self-emptying love in becoming human is proclaimed, and it recalls the Old Testament God who 'visits' or pitches his tent among us. But the expectation is surrounded with images of struggle, mortality and judgement. To recall the child at Bethlehem is also to recall the end time when Christ will 'come again in his glorious majesty' to hold to account the living and the dead. And a profound battle is announced between the works and forces of darkness and the light that is to come; there is a sense that we must engage with death in order to understand the nature of eternal life.

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