

Knowing where to look

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, December 11, 2011, The Third Sunday of Advent.
Based on John 1:6-8,19-28.*

I took our son Adam to the Barnum and Bailey circus when he was six or seven years old. They had set up that famous traveling show in the Capital Center in Landover, MD—a big venue. Everything about it was big and loud.

But it wasn't so much the size that challenged us. It was the layout. This was the full-bore American-style three-ring circus. We had a slightly different expectation. The summer before we had chanced on a touring performance in New Hampshire of the Big Apple Circus. Big Apple was new then, and it was a revelation. It was a European-style one-ring circus. One act followed another and you always knew where to look. At Barnum and Bailey the ring master's hugely amplified voice was constantly yelling. "In the center ring here." "In ring number two, this; and ring number three that."

We never knew where to look.

Life is a three-ring circus. The universe has not favored us with the Big Apple-style circus, with one ring thoughtfully programmed to amaze or to terrify, and always in focus. In life, as in the three-ring circus, the options are dizzying. And they are terrifying because you never know where to look. And there's an interesting way in which life is terrifying and confusing. The circus ring, as you may or may not know, is exactly thirteen meters or 42 feet in diameter—which turns out to be the size that horses can comfortably travel as they ride in a circle at a full gallop.

In the same way, it's undeniably true that human existence is measurable and *finite*. The universe is *infinite*. That molecular characteristic means that life, during its finite span, is open to infinite choice. That's quite a tension. And you and I live in that tension. You may say, "Wait a minute, the system can crush you and only a few people at a time have any real freedom to choose the course of their lives." But I'd put it the other way. Most people, most of the time, do have choice.

How do you choose? Where do you look? Whose star do you follow? And when is it too late to do anything about your life and the choices you've made?

These are Advent questions. Advent is this little season that time and tradition have hallowed. In it there's an honest sense that life—at least the way we live it, certainly in New York—is a three-ring circus. There's so much to occupy your attention that you just don't know where to look.

That's an old and very human problem. You may have been reading the same news that I've been reading recently about a very well-known, very highly regarded Wall Street fund guy who just lost a billion dollars of people's money. And he said to Congress the other day, "I don't know where to look for it."

One thing to look for in a community of people who are helping one another spiritually and otherwise to grow is looking for symptoms of maturity. We've said it here before: whining at the universe and blaming everybody else are symptoms of immaturity. People who just complain and unload their complaints on other people, on the system, or on God, are really stuck.

It's the ability to change, to adapt, to discover that makes us grown-ups. That ability is a spiritual gift. And, it's a necessity if you want to keep growing.

As I said, this is an old situation. This morning's Gospel lesson is an example. John is a witness—a testifier to the light that is to come. He, himself, is quite compelling. He's got a real take on what seems to be wrong. He's offering a way that people can begin to change. He's loud. He gets noticed. People want to look at him. And yet he says, *Don't look here. You're looking at the wrong ring in the circus. Because there's somebody in the crowd*—this is the John's Gospel version of it—*yes, somebody in the crowd that you haven't met yet who is the real deal, the center ring.*

That's the Jesus factor in history and what brings us here today. In spite of all the theories and all the theologies, the Jesus factor—what is going on in his life and his teaching in that center ring— is still compelling. And still can be life-changing.

Where do we look for that?

First look back. We are a people of tradition. There are a lot of things in tradition that are better than what we have today. That's a basic insight of our religion. So, make part of your time devoted

to learning about those things—appropriating them into your life, and sifting out the things that have been replaced because they turned out not to be so helpful or so true.

Secondly, look around you. Look at the situation that you're in. Look at what you've created. Look at how far you've come in your life and at what else you want to do. Look at your relationships. These are the things that make us anxious, but they're also areas of possibility.

And then, of course, *look to the future.*

It's said that the thing that distinguishes the human animal from all the other animals on the planet is our ability to think of the future.

One very late development in the human species, when we got up off all fours and began to stand up, was that our forehead filled out. (That's how you hold your hat on!) We know about this fairly miraculous frontal lobe mostly by grisly accident. Occasionally people have suffered traumatic frontal lobe injuries, and often they walk around feeling very little pain. They don't lose their personality, they don't lose their memories, they don't lose their ability to live. But they do lose one thing. They have no idea what's happening tomorrow.

We are interested in what's happening tomorrow. We're interested in what's coming. That's an Advent thought, but it's an all-year thought too. It's a universal human trait. And it's why people were interested that someone very compelling could say, "Somebody is about to show up in your life who will make a difference. Who has some key to the mysteries of living. Some hope for human justice on this planet."

There is a reason, however, that sometimes we can't get connected with that person in the center ring, and with what he did and what he taught. It's the same reason that ordinary people have trouble with any sort of connection. People who describe their inability to form relationships or feel connected to a community—one like this or a larger community—are people who feel ashamed. It's one of the roadblocks to making connections. If you don't think that they will accept you or like you, the chances are you won't get connected.

And what did Jesus go about doing? He went about being with and accepting people whom tradition of the time said were unacceptable. In inviting everyone to his table, he violated not all the rules but enough of the rules to make the point that things could be different. He spoke to the shame when he said: *You are already accepted. You are already beautiful. You already have a good deal of what you need.*

Not everyone says this, nor are all religions oriented this way. But ours is.

It's said that you have a companion along the way. You have what tradition calls a Savior. And what does a Savior do? A Savior makes you whole by minimizing the shame and maximizing the acceptance. In a few minutes in the service, in the "Proper Preface" to the Eucharistic Prayer, you will hear words that speak directly to this.

"You sent your beloved Son to redeem us from sin and death and make us heirs of everlasting life, that when he shall come again in power and great triumph to judge the world, we may *without shame or fear rejoice* to behold his appearing."

The Spirit of God, the power of God in our midst that extends the living Jesus to us is a power to help relieve us of the shame that prevents us from getting on in life. You're not surprised, are you? The confusion about where to look in life can be resolved by the answer, "Look to Jesus."

Some of you may remember a famous phrase from the twelfth chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews, from the late New Testament period. "Look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" is the traditional language, listen to Eugene Peterson's dynamic translation in *The Message*:

"Do you see what this means? All these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans [that would be the saints], cheering us on. It means we better get on with it. Strip down. Start running and never quit. No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed. That exhilarating finish in and with God."

It's hard to know where to look. Distractions are everywhere. So, study him. Keep fixed on him. Discover things about him you never knew. This, as the translation said, will shoot adrenaline into your souls. Which might be what today's collect meant, "Stir up your power O God, and with great might come among us." Stir yourself up. That's the meaning of Advent, and it will get you through a lot of circuses.

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