

How Can This Be?

A Service for Advent
Rob Eller-Isaacs
December 5th, 2010

Reading

Consent (excerpt from *Advent 16: Annunciation*)
Denise Levertov

There was the minute no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.
A breath unbreathed,
Spirit,
suspended,
waiting.

She did not cry, "I cannot, I am not worthy,"
nor, "I have not the strength."
She did not submit with gritted teeth,
raging, coerced.
Bravest of all humans,
consent illumined her.
The room filled with its light,
the lily glowed in it,
and the iridescent wings.
Consent, courage unparalleled,
opened her utterly.

Reflection

She was not the only one. She was not the only one who knew

in the hard-earned quiet of her heart that she had a sacred duty

to decide. I don't think it was a matter of principle. Her choosing, the inner knowledge that she could, with integrity, tell the angel yes or no, reflects the fact of her divinity. And so she glowed, "consent illumined her." We see like radiance in lovers and those whose work is true vocation. We see it in those who have strengthened their minds in the interest of love. Mary was not meek and mild. I want to imagine she was chosen for her clarity. I want to believe she was chosen for her strength. I want to say that she was chosen for her courage.

One doesn't usually think of Christmas requiring courage but it does. It takes courage to be still in the midst of the frenzy. It takes courage to be kind and calm, not to withdraw in disdain of it all, but to learn to choose. We have a Christmas cactus in our front window that blooms every year at Thanksgiving. By now every one of its sectioned pink flowers has fallen. Each year I watch and wonder. Will it bloom again by Christmas? The cactus, stripped bare as a crown of thorns, teaches me to wait.

What teaches you?

(Katy sings her "Hail Mary")

Reading

Waiting in Line Nick Penna

When you listen you reach
into dark corners and
pull out your wonders.
When you listen your
ideas come in and out
like they were waiting in line.
Your ears don't always listen.
It can be your brain, your
fingers, your toes.
You can listen anywhere.
Your mind might not want to go.
If you can listen you can find
answers to questions you didn't know.
If you have listened, truly
listened, you don't find your
self alone.

Reflection

Love begins with listening. It isn't easy. It isn't easy to quiet
the voices in our heads enough to listen for the still small voice,
the sacred poem, the murmur of a new-born babe. One wise
man speaking for all three in Eliot's telling of the journey says
"At the end we preferred to travel all night, sleeping in

snatches, with the voices singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly." But when we listen, when we slow all the way down, when we actually come into the present moment alone or with others we love, our eyes and ears and hearts inevitably open and we are filled with wonder.

Your mind might not want to go. Our minds might throw obstacles up in our way because somewhere inside us we know that wonder takes us places we're afraid to go. And so we push it all away. We tell ourselves we have no need for all the

holidays might bring. We fear the headlong rush. We judge the trappings harshly. But when we strip away the glitz and garbage, when we look behind the tinsel veil, what we see is darkness, stars bright and spangled in the cold night sky and you and I remember those dear moments past when wonder has had its way with us. The poet cummings sings..”I’d rather learn from one bird how to sing than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance.”

Reading

Mary’s Hiding (excerpt)
Rumi

Before these possessions you love
Slip away, say what Mary said
When she was surprised by Gabriel.

"I'll hide inside God."

Naked in her room
She saw a form of beauty
That could give her new life.

Like the sun coming up,
Or a rose as it opens,
She leaped, as her habit was,
out of herself into the presence

Reflection

These are the days of advent. This is the time of waiting. There are those who move too quickly. They allow the marketing, the ads and urgencies to cut the waiting short and catapult them, up and over the deep time in the darkness that we need so very much. All we own will slip away. All these possessions we love will slip away. We owe ourselves the time we need to come

into the presence of the Holy. When wonder wakes us, when
the Angel whispers news that make us want to hide, help us,
we pray to hide inside the Holiness itself. Help us surrender to
the silence that it may blossom into song. Help us find the
courage to leap out of ourselves into the Presence that by
waiting and with wonder we might greet the child, new and
fair, the child who is always being born, within, among and
beyond us.

Katy reads again and then I say

Amen.