

1st Sunday of Advent, Cycle B
Isaiah 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7
Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:33-37
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C. S. Lewis once remarked that it was no accident that parents and teachers so often say they can tolerate any failing in children, except lying, because the lie, after all, is the only defensive weapon the child possesses.

While it's true that the instinctive reaction of a guilty child is often to resort to lying, a clever youngster has other weapons in her arsenal. One tricky but potentially rewarding ploy is to make the parent feel responsible for the child's offense. A child who has been caught red-handed in a serious breach of the rules can try to tap into the modern parent's brimming-over reservoir of guilt and self-accusation.

The guilty young person can cry out, "If only you had been there when I needed you so badly, I would never have done it." Or, "Why, oh why, was I never taught decent values? With no positive role models, feeling neglected and unloved, is it any wonder that I do this kind of thing?"

That this is not a new technique, is evident from our first reading from Isaiah, in which the Chosen People, our spiritual older siblings, try it out on an angry Yahweh: "O Lord, you are our father; we are the clay and you are the potter: we are all the work of your hands." "Why do you harden our hearts so that we fear you not?" In other words, whatever we are, you made us that way. "Why do you let us wander, oh Lord, from your ways?" In short, "We only did it because you let us do it." "For you have hidden your face from us and delivered

us up to our guilt.” Or, “Where were you when we needed you?” This tactic, while perhaps unworthy, does indicate that they knew their God to be characterized by mercy and compassion. God could be “got around” because God loved so much.

Like the people of ancient Israel, we too know perfectly well that we have sinned. And like them, we know that our actions have implications for our relationship with God. It’s like we are living in the shadow of those ominous words heard so often, as children, by people of my own generation: “Just wait till your father gets home!” And today’s Gospel, and the entire season of Advent which begins today, is a reminder that God’s arrival, in Jesus Christ, is imminent. It’s as if we have already heard the car door slam in the driveway, and are waiting for the front door handle to turn.

How will we, conscious as we are of our sinfulness, greet Christ when he comes? Let’s employ this season of Advent to prepare to give Christ the kind of welcome parents dream of: May he find us filled with confidence that whatever our sins, he will act toward us out of an overflowing divine love, compared to which a human parent’s feelings for a beloved child are only a shadow.

We can spend Advent, not polishing an arsenal of accusations and rationalizations, but fostering in ourselves and in our communities feelings of love and trust. So that when the handle turns and the door opens we will not be found trembling under a table or behind a curtain, or collating our lists of extenuating circumstances. Nor will we offer a cursory greeting cast over the shoulder from in front of the computer. Instead, with a joyous cry, we will drop what we are doing and run to our Savior’s arms.