



Advent Reflection for Wednesday, December 15

Daria Rigney

You can listen to the reading and reflection by clicking [here](#).

### John 3:16-21

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”*

I’d been hoping to be given an Advent assignment that matched the festive season--a lyrical, joyful excerpt from the Psalms or a well-loved parable depicting Jesus’ mercy and miracles. This passage, in contrast, is more of a no-nonsense jeremiad more suited to the end of days than the Christmas holiday. It is, in fact, the most popular and beloved text in the entire bible. Raucous, excitable football fans routinely hold up placards as they cheer their team to victory with the citation John 3:16-21. It is the favorite of evangelicals, a kind of shorthand for telegraphing an unequivocal belief in God. It seems to ask, are you with us or not?

Just before we meet this text in John, Nicodemus, the faithful Jewish Pharisee and scholar who would soon provide the embalming spices for Jesus’ body, asked Jesus what he means by being “reborn” in order to have eternal life. How can you be reborn, he asks, isn’t that a physical impossibility? Jesus’ response starts out with explaining how God “so loved” the world that he gave up his only son for the world’s salvation. That strange syntax, “so loved”, makes sense to any parent experiencing the expansive, boundary-shattering love that children bring to us. A love that we never knew we were capable of. It is that kind of love, the transformative love of a parent for a child, that enables us to understand the love-beyond-limits that God offers us in the life and death of his son, Jesus

Again, I wished that I’d been given Jesus’ other great commandment to contemplate- to love our neighbor as ourselves, an edict that feels relevant and understandable and much needed in our modern world. John’s text is harsh and filled with judgment, without nuance or charity. You’re either a believer or not and, if you’re not, you are lost in the shadows and destined for damnation. Yet, some of the best people I know are not believers. The world as we know it can’t be neatly divided into believers vs

nonbelievers. We know all too well that many placard carrying, flag waving “believers” are at the root of some of the worst injuries to their neighbors and the planet. And so many “non-believers” are beacons of kindness, optimism, activism, and who work to expand our possibilities for grace. Despite their non-belief, they are shining examples for us of “ex umbris ad lucem”—out of the shadows and into the light. So, how do we reconcile the harsh ultimatum of this text with our own far more nuanced, or at least modern, world knowledge of good and evil?

These challenging, reductive words from John are not the comforting words we look for as Christmas approaches. They force us to face the core of our faith even as we huddle around the crèche and welcome the baby in the manger. I want to believe that this is the rebirth that we long for. I want to know that beyond all the lights, trees, gifts, and songs there is an essential rebirth waiting for me and for all of us if only we have the courage and the strength to declare our belief and commitment to God’s promise for redemption. Despite how predictable Christmas rituals are, I want to celebrate the birth of the baby in the manger this year as an unexpected miracle that, like the lights of Chanukah, gives off more light and hope than we could have ever imagined possible.

*Daria Rigney lives in Ditmas Park with her husband, Francis Del Monaco, and their big yellow dog, Henri. This will be her third Christmas season at Holy Apostles Church.*

