

ADVENT I

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Romans 13:11

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Messiah is coming. Matthew 24:40

Paul, writing to the Romans in the mid-fifties A.D., is convinced that something amazing is about to happen. Matthew, writing somewhere between 20 and 40 years later, is still waiting for the same thing –something unparalleled, unprecedented: salvation, the dead awakening, or the living taken up into heaven. Something marvelous. Something long awaited, eagerly anticipated. Something of God.

I've just finished listening, as I drive, to the extraordinary novel **Home** by the writer Marilynne Robinson. It's somewhat of a sequel to her novel **Gilead**, which I've also listened to, and I read both books before hearing them on C.D. I find myself haunted by the characters and mood and tone of **Home** – the inhabitants of the novel keep drifting into my consciousness like intimate family I've recently parted from.

Marilynne Robinson is a serious intellectual Christian, and both these novels are infused with theology. Two of the main characters are Protestant clergymen who have spent their lives and vocations in the mid-western town of Gilead, and their theologies are Calvinist, strict, and often dark. In **Home**, the story revolves around the dying Reverend Boughton, his single daughter Glory who has come home after a long, failed engagement to care for him in his end days, and his black sheep son Jack, who has reached a crisis of some mysterious nature and has come home to – well, we aren't sure.

Jack has always been troubled and always been trouble. Even as a child he was different from his many brothers and sisters: a petty thief, a mischief maker, the classic preacher's kid hellion. He left home for good after impregnating a young farm girl, perhaps 20 years earlier, and did not even return for his mother's funeral.

As the story unfolds, Glory, and we, learn more of Jack's missing years, by slow degrees. He spent many years as a drunk – that was surmised by the family, and though sober, he now has a hard time staying away from bars. He has had a woman, for whom he

yearns with increasing desperation, writing her letters frequently and watching anxiously for the mail each day.

He has come home, it seems, to try to discover the cause of his troubled nature, and to this end he questions his father and also his namesake, The Reverend John Ames, about possible theological sources for his sin, his brokenness. He has come home looking for absolution, perhaps, for forgiveness, for redemption. He's searching and waiting for answers, as he waits in vain for word from his beloved.

Home is a story of the terrible destructive pain and suffering brought upon each other by Jack and his father, and his godfather John Ames. Each time they talk they may be hoping – and we certainly hope– for new understanding, compassion, forgiveness. And each time they wound each other more and more deeply. It's the high drama of father-son conflict.

Meanwhile, subtly and obliquely and through the homeliest of transactions, Glory and Jack are forming bonds of, alliance, comradeship, and affection. Glory forgives Jack over and over. She spares him and rescues him from whatever embarrassment and pain she can. She listens as he warily confides in her, and encourages him when he is in despair.

Jack appreciates this, in his way. But his real quest and yearning is for his father's forgiveness, and that never comes. Reverend Boughton has loved Jack above all his other children, and that love has not sufficed to turn Jack from his feckless ways. So the father's damnation falls foremost upon himself, and the old man becomes more and more cruel, inadvertently but nonetheless fatally, as he expresses his dark judgment upon them both. And Reverend Ames does nothing to mitigate the complex misery.

I could go on and on talking about this story, deep and rich as it is. But my point is this: it's a story of waiting. Everyone is waiting for Reverend Boughton to die. Jack is waiting for a word of hope from his beloved, and waiting for forgiveness from his father – either or both of these will represent redemption for him. Glory is waiting for Jack's hopes to be realized, and waiting for Jack to show signs of righting himself whether or not those hopes come to pass.

Meanwhile, Glory's growing devotion to Jack can't turn his life around. It's a great gift, which he notices periodically but which never compensates for his need for his father's understanding; that need can never be satisfied.

In the end, with the old man close to death, Jack leaves. Glory believes she will never see him again. But the story ends – I don't want to spoil the ending for any of you who may want to read this great book – the story ends with Glory understanding what she will spend the remainder of her life waiting for, and the blessing that will be when it comes to her. Something of Jack. Something amazing and marvelous. Something of God.

We enter now into the season of Advent; our time of preparation, our time of waiting. But as with all our liturgical seasons, as with all the seasons of our lives, Advent is not just one thing or the other. It is not just patience and penitence, not just darkness and cold. Advent is also abundance and mercy, the light shining in the darkness. Advent is about what is to come and what has come already: the realm of God.

What Jack Boughton waited for seemed impossible, and waiting for the impossible can be soul-destroying. And in that waiting what he failed all-too-often to appreciate was the abundance and mercy offered by his sister. That was his mistake. Let's not make that same mistake ourselves.

Let us, this Advent, in the midst of our waiting, not fail to notice the blessings all around us, the love that moves among us, the light that shines in the darkness, foretelling, once again, the coming of Christ.

Amen.