

Return to God | Third Sunday of Advent, Year B
St. Stephen's Church | Celtic Evensong

This past summer, I spent about a month at an Anglican monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, just across the river from Boston. As I prepared to transition from working full time to going back to school to begin my seminary studies, I carved out these 4 weeks to give myself some space to reorient and prepare for the road ahead.

While it was beautiful and loaded with memories I'll never forget, the days were very full. About a week into the internship, I began to question whether this experience would grant me the reflective space I was hoping to find. In fact I often found myself feeling harried and tired as I lurched from one assigned task to the next.

The reality is that the work schedule I was given did leave time for prayer and stillness, I just wasn't always that good at following it. If I was asked to sweep and clean both sacristies, then I wasn't going to stop three quarters of the way through the job just because the work period had ended. Instead, I'd choose to push on just a little while longer so that I could finish the task and enjoy the momentary satisfaction of checking another chore off my 'to do' list. Anyways, what's 5 more minutes? Or 10? Or 20?

The brothers tried to tell me that this really wasn't necessary. After all, the dust bunnies would still be there tomorrow along with the unraked leaves and the altar linens still in need of some ironing. For better or for worse, my protestant work ethic is pretty deeply engrained and I often find it quite difficult to take a beat and make peace with things left undone.

Although knowing full well that this tendency is one I am prone to, I decided to bring it to one of the brothers for his advice. As a response to my penchant for business, he recounted a story pulled from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* which is a collection of anecdotes, reflections, and parables attributed to the earliest Christian monks, men who lived lives of austerity and solitude out in the wilderness so that they might draw closer to God.

In the story the brother told me, 11 out of 12 novices approach an older monk who is their leader. These younger ascetics are hurt because the abbot clearly has a favorite among them who's name is Mark. In an effort to explain the nature of his affection to the 11 other novices, the older monk visits each of their cells saying, 'Brother so and so, come here; I need you,' but none of them immediately came.

However, coming to Mark's cell, he knocked and said, 'Mark.' And upon hearing the old man's voice, the young monk jumped up at a moment's notice. The old man then sent him away to run an errand and he did. When the other 11 novices finally did come, the abbot took them into Mark's room and pointed at the book he was in the middle of transcribing. Mark had begun to write an 'omega' but so great was his devotion to the old man that he stopped the very second the abbot called his name. So deep was Mark's affection that he ran to his elder before finishing a letter, let alone a word.

After hearing that story, I can honestly say that it was a turning point in my time at the monastery. In fact, the inward questions it stirred will probably haunt my existence for a long time to come. What would my life look like if I ran to God with that kind of immediacy? With that kind of devotion? With that kind of love?

While I still struggle with business for business's sake, Advent beckons me to a different kind of life. This season marks the start of the church year. It is a cycle back to the beginning, the genesis of something new, but loveliest of all, it is an invitation to prepare myself to return to God.

However, it is also a plea to listen to "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness," to "make straight the way of the Lord." And so amidst the twinkling lights of pink and purple candles as well as the harmonies of Advent carols, I pray that as a new year comes I will be especially attuned to God's voice calling my name, pulling me back to him through the words of another. I hope that as often as I can, I will meet Christ in my neighbor, so swift in love that upon hearing the first syllable of my name, I drop my pen before dotting the "I" or crossing the "T."

Amen.