

# COLUMNISTS

## Advent promises that God is with us

Throughout Advent the Scripture readings are full of images of God doing wonderful, outstanding things "when he comes." So we read about blind people being made to see, deaf people hearing, crooked roads being made straight, mountains being brought low.

But these wonderful images of human difficulties being overcome set us up for disappointment, since they don't appear to happen in real life. In real life, it doesn't seem at all as if God rescues us from "all our afflictions." Blind people go on being blind, sick people die, lame people continue to need wheelchairs, the ways we travel continue to pose all sorts of difficulties for us.

We might wonder what all the "hopeful waiting" talked about during Advent is all about, since we see so little of the magic described in the readings.

Not too long ago a great friend of mine was diagnosed with a brain tumor. By any accounting, divine or human, she was a truly remarkable person. My thoughts at the time were that the world would be much better off if she remained in it. I prayed, and many other people prayed, that she would recover from her disease and live a long and fruitful life.



the  
moral  
life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

But she did not recover. Despite dramatic surgery, the best medical treatments available, and hundreds of people asking God to make her better, her tumor persisted and she died — three days after Christmas! Three days after the conclusion of Advent, during which we had been reading about God's promises to rescue us from all sorts of limitations and tragedies.

I remember at the time thinking that it would be dangerous to take God seriously, since we stand to be terribly disappointed when life — and death — go on as usual, despite all the Advent promises to the contrary.

For despite all the promise of Advent, and all the hope of Christmas, it can in-

deed seem that little is changed "in real life." What can all the promises mean, since we still experience sickness and weakness, barriers and division, selfishness and greed, misery and hatred? People still die, our plans fail, our characters remain flawed, our spouses, our children, our politicians continue to disappoint us.

If we think about it, much of what occurs in the world happens *against* God's will! Starvation is not gone from this planet, human needs of all kinds are unmet, violence abounds, division and poverty dominate.

So how are we to take heart from God's coming? What on earth difference does it make? Where do we find answers to these contradictory signals and realities?

I suppose we all have to negotiate this territory for ourselves. We all have to keep facing these very questions at every stage of our lives. Part of the answer comes, I think, as we learn to look not for "magic solutions" to our difficulties, but for signs of victories won *in spite of* the overt and obvious problems that are part of our world.

Last year at this time a terrific event at my local YMCA brought some of this home for me. A man named Richard

swims at the "Y" most mornings. In his early 40s Richard suffered a stroke, which affected his ability to move. But he swims anyway, and last December he marked a great milestone: He had swum a total of 1,000 miles. It had taken him seven years. The staff at the "Y" marked the event with congratulatory cake and streamers, balloons and photographs.

Richard's paralysis wasn't "cured," much as he, and we, would like it to be. But in his courage and persistence, through his way of living and thriving in the face of the problem that *wasn't* magically eliminated, the lame are indeed "walking" and "the crooked, difficult way" has become passable.

The promise of Christmas, the promise of 'God with us' is very much just that: God is with us. God is faithful to us and present with us through everything. God is faithful to us in joy and triumph, but also in sickness and limitation, through suffering, even through death. The promise of Advent is that God will be with us and faithful to us even through *death*.

"Magic solutions" to life's problems would be grand. God with us and faithful to us in the midst of life's problems is far, far grander.

## Christmas should open our eyes to children

On a Friday evening two weeks before Christmas, I stopped by to visit Sister Josephine, the administrator of St. Ann's Infant and Maternity Home in Hyattsville, Md. Through its many programs, St. Ann's reaches out to homeless teenage mothers and provides a safe and healthy home for abused and neglected children.

As we walked through the building's festively decorated halls, we heard the lively conversations of the young mothers as their babies ate next to them in a communal dining room. We listened to a loving volunteer soothing a crying newborn in a nursery filled with six babies in wooden cribs. And as we passed one room, we heard the frightened cries of a young boy who had arrived a few days before.

It was anything but a silent night, although in every way it was a holy night.

"You know, it does something to my whole insides when I think about what we're doing to our children today," Sister Josephine said. "Somewhere along the line children have gotten in the way and we're paying a terrible price for how we've been treating our children.

"We had one 3-week-old boy who was brought to us after he was beaten up and thrown in a trash can. We took in a little girl who was in Children's Hospital for several months after being scalded by her mother and her mother's



family  
matters

BY EILEEN MARN

boyfriend. Two babies, 6 months and 18 months, were left alone in an apartment for three days until a neighbor heard them crying. We are destroying babies at 6 and 7 months old through physical and sexual abuse and then we wonder why there are so many problems in our world today."

When Sister Josephine Murphy was a novice in the Daughters of Charity she prayed she would be assigned to work in child care. And for the past 40 years she has had her prayers answered, working with children in New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C. For the past five years, Sister Josephine has served at St. Ann's where she oversees a prenatal program for pregnant teenagers, a children's residential program for almost 60 children who have been abused, an adolescent mother-baby program, an ac-

credited high school program and a day care program.

As Sister talked about the horror of child abuse, I couldn't help but ask, especially at this time of year, why such innocent children had to suffer so terribly and why so many teenage mothers were left abandoned with no place to go. I wondered, where was the message of Christmas to be found for children and young mothers like those at St. Ann's?

"The season of Christmas makes me ache even more for these children than I already do," said Sister Josephine. "I don't ever feel hopeless but I do get angry and I try to channel that anger to talk to anyone who will listen to me about laws that need to be changed to protect our children. I will not hesitate to speak up on these children's behalf because it seems that no one else is doing it and these children have rights which must be protected.

"Do you know how angry it makes me that the majority of pregnant girls who come to St. Ann's are homeless?" Sister Josephine continued. "In many cases their mothers' boyfriends have molested them and that's how they got pregnant. The mothers blame the daughters and tell them to get out of the house. The mothers are on drugs and they're dragging down their teenage daughters with them. A lot of the children we see have been scarred by the effects of prenatal

drug and alcohol abuse."

For almost all of their lives, many of these pregnant teenagers have been told they're good-for-nothings who will never amount to anything. But at St. Ann's, a group of committed sisters, staff and volunteers work tirelessly to restore an element of love, trust and hope.

As Sister and I continued our tour of St. Ann's, a teenager motioned to us as she picked up her 4-day-old son. "Come on over here, Sister Josephine. You have to see my little boy," beamed the proud young mother. She handed the infant to Sister Josephine who cuddled the crying baby and gently rocked him to sleep.

At Christmas, I think we are not only invited to come before the Child Jesus lying in a crib of hay but also to come before the cribs of the babies at places like St. Ann's and reach out to them. In the bruised and broken bodies of these children we are reminded that what lies at the heart of Christmas is a Child. We are also reminded that the Mother of this Child, like many of the mothers at St. Ann's, was a poor teenager without a home on the night her Son was born.

As we walk in the darkness of child abuse, violence and homelessness today, we must have faith that the brilliant star that guided three kings to a baby in Bethlehem all those years ago can still lead us out of the darkness and into the light.

Due to holidays, the Courier will not publish on December 28.

Happy Holidays!

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