

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B  
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
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My sixth-grade teacher liked to pepper the boring lessons of spelling and long division with the arts. One drawing activity she liked involved handing out a piece of paper with simple lines or shapes already stamped on it. The paper might come pre-printed with a circle and a straight line, or a square and triangle with a squiggle connecting them. The idea was that the simple shapes would provide some parameters for your artistic imagination. For instance, a triangle, under the crayon of a creative child, might be turned into a cat's nose, or a circle might end up being the moon overlooking a lake at night.

I had mixed feelings about this activity, mainly because I wasn't particularly good at it. It's not that I'm not a creative person, but I've never had very good spatial skills, which makes drawing a real bummer. My ineptitude was highlighted by the brilliance—and I use that word quite intentionally—of the boy in the desk next to mine.

My friend Cyrus, and isn't that just the coolest name, had a tidy desk filled with special pens and pencils that his parents would buy him from the art store. And his ability to draw was limited only by how much time he had or how big the paper was. Under his hands, these little exercises started to live and breathe on their own. I remember one in particular that turned a circle into the surface of the sun, complete with reds and yellows so vivid you could almost feel the heat. In another, Cyrus turned a simple line into an oak tree filling the page from end to end with brown, textured bark and vivid green leaves that seemed to sway.

I think at the time, I felt envious that I didn't seem to have the gift that my friend had. My artistic offerings seemed one dimensional and dull when pinned sheepishly up on the bulletin board next to his. There was usually some kind of art contest in the hallways, and we might as well have called it the "Cyrus is Going to Win Contest" because his winning really was a foregone conclusion. Still, he was my friend, and I was proud of him. Sort of.

As we moved through elementary school into junior high, high school, and even college, his abilities as an artist grew, while I managed to go through my entire education and never take an art class. Once I even heard that he was doing design work in Hollywood and had a massive installation at a museum in Oakland. I read an article about his art, and the reviews were overwhelmingly positive, and I hope to visit the museum sometime when I'm out West. Over the years my envy abated, and through some alchemy turned into gladness that Cyrus existed in the world, making the most wonderful art. If anything, I found myself wanting to tell people about

his work and about his magnificent art. I wanted to point to his sculptures and paintings so that people could experience the little slice of heaven you experience when in the presence of something majestic.

I've never really thought of pointing as a Christian virtue until I was reading the texts this Advent. Isaiah is pointing to the future; John the Baptist is always pointing to Jesus; Jesus is pointing to God and the kingdom that is coming. And then Jesus kind of points back at John and says, "You know he's pretty great, but you should see what God can really do when God gets going."

I think there is something about pointing that requires you to let your ego go. And letting one's ego go is usually the first step in any worthwhile spiritual pursuit. You might think of pointing as the ultimate Advent posture—pointing toward the coming reign of God, pointing to the manger and the Incarnation of God, pointing to the Mother of God ready and willing to be a vessel of change for the entire world. During Advent, it's our Christian joy to see all the places God is looking to be born in the world and to point them out to our neighbors. "See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

You don't need to put on camel hair clothes and eat locusts to help the world see that Jesus is coming—though I hear that it helps. Every time you point out an injustice and its remedy, you are pointing to Jesus. Every time you point out radical welcome and kindness to the stranger, deserving or undeserving, you are pointing to Jesus. Every time you point to the poor and disenfranchised, you are pointing to the baby that will be born on Christmas.

So, let God help you let go of your ego and become your own version of John the Baptist this Advent. It might hurt a little at first to have to remember that God is a big deal and that you are not a big deal. But once you figure it out, it can be quite liberating. You are all prophets in the wilderness pointing to the reality of the reign of God. You are all the angel Gabriel, telling Mary the good news of the coming Christ child. Don't spend time worrying about the neighbor who is a little kinder than you, or the friend who is a bit more generous than you, or even the artist whose work seems to glorify God more than your humbler offerings. Instead, rejoice that God is at work in the world, and help prepare for the kingdom. You are pointers, you are prophets, and you are marvelous. Amen.