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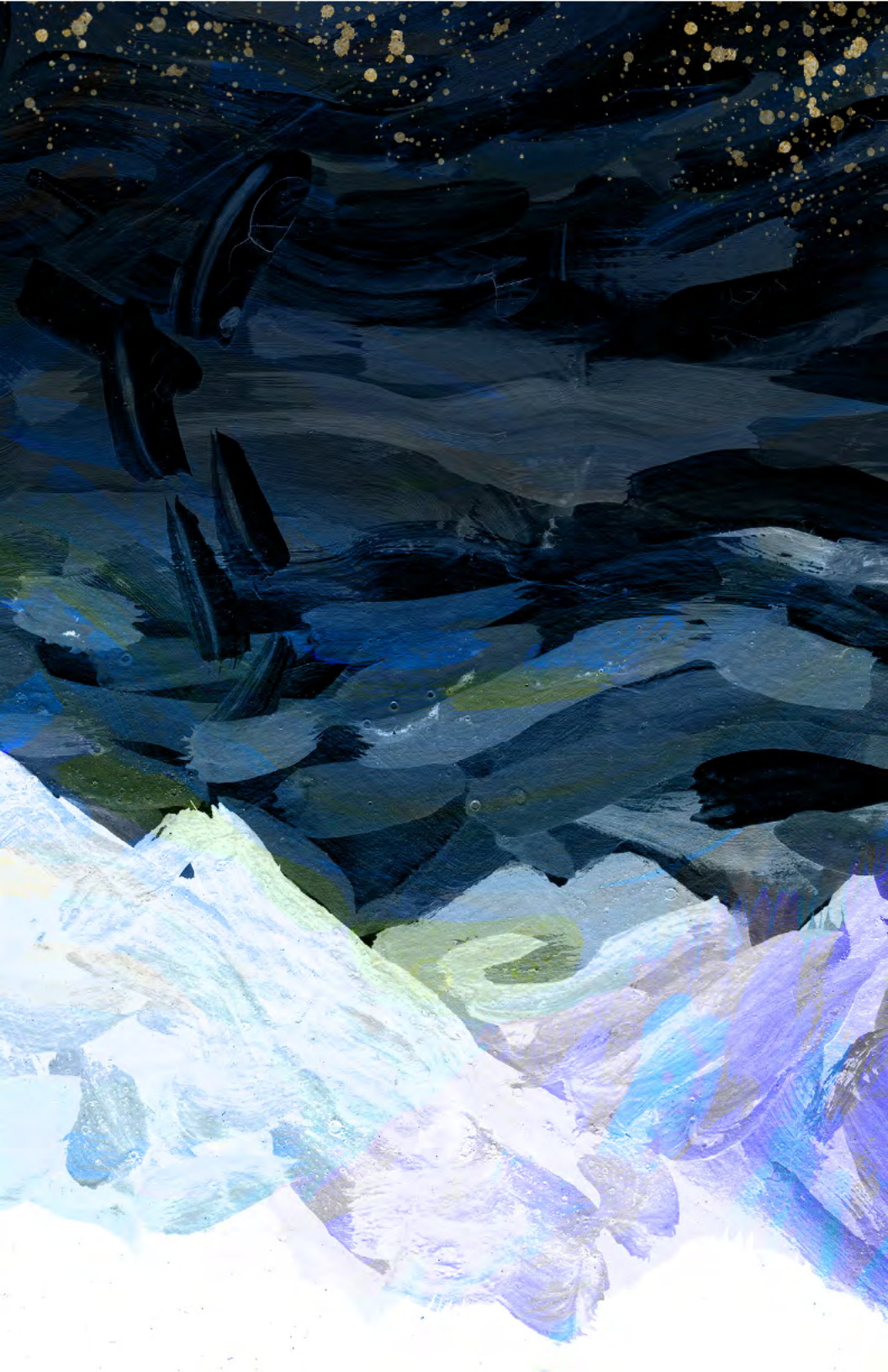
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FIRST WEEK
OF ADVENT

WORD



FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT
SUNDAY

BEGINNING IS THE FORM OF THE
CHRISTIAN LIFE.

ADRIENNE VON SPEYR,
*THE WORD*¹

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

The opening line of a great story is unforgettable. For Dickens, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”; for Tolstoy, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”; or more simply for Melville, “Call me Ishmael.” In all of them, we find ourselves within an unfolding plot, confounded by its characters, and given again that thrill which comes with a new beginning.

But this is not the case with the Gospel of St. John. “In the beginning was the Word” is not an entry into a plot; it is an immersion into a mystery. We are transported back to the first words ever uttered: “In the beginning was God” (Gn 1:1). It is now a fugue, whose music initiates us at the precipice of the ineffable—a new creation within creation. The first line of the Gospel is, then, not the opening line of a story but the opening of a new reality. In reading it, we have crossed a metaphysical Rubicon.

But there was, in fact, a beginning to creation and the story of the world. There was a moment before which there was nothing. Then the clock starts, creation is set in motion, and the movement of history has begun. But what was before the beginning of the world? That was always the unsearchable realm of the beyond. But now it can be known: The Word is the beginning. “As the beginning, God declares *that* he is. As the word, he declares *who* he is.”² This is the first truth and the lasting paradox of creation: it is not its own beginning; its beginning is the Word.

Advent has begun. With it comes the joys and anxieties of our preparations for Christmas. But beneath these lies the real purpose of the season—*nunc coepi* (“now I begin”). Deep down our hearts desire the conversion of a new beginning and a fresh start. But this cannot be satisfied in the personal resolutions and chronological restarts of the new year. No, the true desire for the

real beginning demands the mysterious immersion of my life into the origin of all reality. “Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness” (Eccl 2:13). The Christian life arises out of wisdom and light: I am becoming; God alone is the beginning. To truly begin means to make him my beginning. And that alone makes for a great human story.

REFLECTION

- 1. What is one concrete way you can put God first, as “the beginning” of every day, hour, or moment?
- 2. When we make ourselves “the beginning” of our lives, we become anxious, and we forget we are loved. This, in turn, prevents us from effectively loving others. Who is one person that you can intentionally put before yourself today?

PRAY

CHRIST JESUS,
YOU ARE THE WORD MADE FLESH AND
THE SPLENDOR OF THE FATHER.
YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD
AND THE LIGHT OF MEN.
COME INTO THE DARKNESS OF MY
HEART THIS DAY
THAT I MAY BECOME ILLUMINED BY
THE PRESENCE OF YOUR WORD.
BE THE BEGINNING AND THE ENDING
OF ALL I DO, ALL I SAY, AND ALL I AM.
JESUS, BE THE AUTHOR OF MY LIFE.
GRANT THAT I MAY LOVE YOU ALWAYS,
AND THEN DO WITH ME
WHAT YOU WILL.
AMEN.

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

MONDAY

TRUE LOVE ALWAYS SPRINGS
MORE FROM THE VISION OF THE
BELOVED'S LOVE-WORTHINESS
THAN FROM ONE'S INNER
IMPULSE TO LOVE.

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR,
*THE GRAIN OF WHEAT*³

AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD

Human life is conceived in the darkness of a mother's womb. Hidden in silence, a body quietly augments, informed and quickened as it is by an immaterial soul. From the dyadic rhythm of the maternal *lub-dub*, a single truth emerges—reality is *being-with*.

Then the child is born, at once blinded by the light. The separation is violent as the warmth of the womb is replaced by a precarious and cold world. The same holds true for conversion, like that of Paul in Damascus: "I could not see because of the brightness of that light" (Acts 22:11). We must be swaddled and drawn back to the heart of the mother. There the miracle happens: The child finds himself beheld in the gaze of the mother; and the Christian, in the gaze of our mother the Church. This is the founding event of human existence. The child comes to know that love exists, long before he will realize that he exists. These are the relational grounds of human life: that we come to self-consciousness only in and through the loving gaze of our mother.

In a mysterious way, the *being-with* of the mother and child images the inner life of the eternal God. As "the Word was with God" (Jn 1:1), *being-with* must be mysteriously contained within the life of God. This is the great secret of God's inner life: He is an eternal exchange of interpersonal love. Within human life, nothing images this so deeply as the way that the gaze of a mother envelops the entire subjectivity of the child. Perhaps God himself wanted to experience this, and thus he was "born of a woman" (Gal 4:4).

"Only when the beginning expresses itself as word are we able to learn to know God."⁴ Our being is meant to radiate the light of God. But when our actions are not informed by the *being-with* logic of reality, we dim the light. If Advent is to be for us a coming of the light, it must first be a return to being.

Remember your mother: Long before she was *being-for*, she was simply *being-with*. These are not only the grounds of human life; they are the paradigm for Christian existence. So let us continue our return to the beginning, to the Word who is with God, so as to live according to the founding event of our life—*being-with*.

REFLECTION

1. Think of the lives of the saints. They were holy because even while on earth they were in a constant state of “being with” God by always being aware of his presence and by praying without ceasing (1 Thes 5:17). What is one way you can remind yourself of the silent presence of God throughout today?
2. By giving ourselves to God in silence, we allow him to create new things within our hearts. Where is a place in your life that you fill with unnecessary noise? How can prayerful silence be incorporated into that place today?

PRAY

MOTHER MARY,
LADY OF SWEETNESS AND
CONTEMPLATIVE BEAUTY,
BE WITH ME THROUGHOUT THIS DAY.
MAKE WITHIN MY HEART A PLACE OF
RECEPTIVE SILENCE,
JUST AS WAS IN YOUR HEART AT THE
MOMENT OF THE ANNUNCIATION
WHEN YOU RECEIVED JESUS
INTO YOURSELF.
THROUGH THIS SILENCE, LEAD US TO
THE HARMONIOUS BIRTH
OF YOUR SON,
THAT WE MAY RECEIVE HIM WITH
UTMOST PEACE AND JOY.
AMEN.

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT
TUESDAY

ADORATION IS LOVE
OVERWHELMED BY THE BEAUTY,
THE POWER, THE IMMENSE
GRANDEUR OF THE LOVED.

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR,
*THE GRAIN OF WHEAT*⁵

AND THE WORD WAS GOD

A silent crowd was arrested as the symphony drew to a close. Gregory Alan Isakov, an acoustic musician and the evening guest, bowed his head in reverence as if seated in a garden of strings, brass, and percussion. The moment was still with the weight of eternity. We had beheld something and were enraptured. It was the most beautiful music we had ever heard.

The moment recalls Tolkien's vision of the creation. In his *Silmarillion*, Middle-earth comes to be through the music of the Ainur. The beauty of musical form expresses the meaningfulness of the Word. But it is communicated precisely as form, a perception that defies rational explanation. Unlike our reason, which often seeks to grasp and comprehend, the intuitive nature of perceived beauty does the opposite—we become its captives.

God “dwells in unapproachable light” (2 Cor 6:14) and is only known in and through the Word. And that Word is pre-existent and consubstantial with the Father. This is the mystery of Jesus Christ, true God from true God. He is the inner content, as well as the radiating form, of our every experience of truth, goodness, and beauty. Our task then is to adopt a posture of attunement to this mystery. Like the symphony we experienced that night, not only were the musicians attuned to one another, but we the captive audience found ourselves attuned to the beautiful. In that sense, it was an experience of God, of the Word-structure of reality that underlies the mystery of creation.

We are tempted to reduce the Christian life to “getting our act together.” But if the essence of life in Christ is attunement, then we must transcend the self-reliance beneath this moralistic framework. We are invited to abandon our project of self-perfection, and perhaps for a time, even our measurable experience of God. But we are never lost in the meaningless cacophony of human events: If the Word is God, then God is the meaning of the