

A Sunday in Advent

On a clear, crisp Sunday afternoon a few Decembers ago, Norm and Susan Johnson, along with their two children, were travelling on the interstate across Ohio, coming back from a quick weekend trip to Grandma's house. Susan, for one, could hardly wait for this trip to be over. No one had been happy the whole time.

Norm had complained about having to travel on a weekend in December. He had planned to work some overtime that Saturday—just to get out of the house she suspected. Things had been growing tense between them lately, to the point that Susan was beginning to worry about their future together. For 15 year-old Bill December meant parties and dances and basketball games, so he, too, had protested that a weekend this close to Christmas was too important to waste on a family trip. And in reality he was hardly with the family at all through the whole weekend. He had spent practically the whole time with his earbuds in his ears and his eyes glued to the screen of his phone. His ten year-old sister Tina had at least come somewhat willingly—it just took a bribe of a couple hours at the big new mall near Grandma's suburban home to buy her cooperation. All said, the Johnsons were a pretty sullen crew as they drove back across Ohio that Sunday afternoon.

They were still about three hours from home when their car began acting up and then died completely on the side of the road. There they were, stranded on a lonely stretch of highway, miles from the nearest exit, and it was already mid afternoon on a short December day. The nearest exit was way too far to try to walk for help—besides, clouds were beginning to appear in the sky and there was a hint of a snowstorm beginning to blow up. To make things even worse, inexplicably their phones had all stopped working. It's hard to imagine on an interstate, but could there have been a dead spot in the cell coverage?

Norm switched on the flashers and Susan got the little orange flag out of the glove compartment to hang on the antenna. The car rocked in the wind as cars sped by. Their hopes soared momentarily when they saw the flashing lights of a tow truck approaching from behind them. But as it got closer, they could see that it already was towing a car. It never even slowed down as it, too, went flying past as fast as the law allowed.

The sun was beginning to set and a few flakes were falling from the sky when a rusty blue old Ford Taurus pulled up behind them. A small man with a

wrinkled face approached them, and after he greeted them with a smile he said that he knew just who to call, and promised to be back in ten minutes with a mechanic. He jumped back in his car and sped down the highway, and in what seemed to Norm like an impossibly short time, the Taurus reappeared, now joined by a tow truck. In a matter of moments, Norm and Susan and the kids were warming themselves on hot chocolate in the friendly stranger's car, while their car was being hitched to the truck.

As their little caravan pulled back onto the road, Norm spoke up and said, "I don't know where my manners are, I've never even introduced myself. I'm Norm Johnson, and this is Susan, and Bill, and Tina. What's your name?"

The stranger, who was a man of few words, replied, "You can call me Sam. I'm glad I came along when I did, with the weather being what it is."

Susan couldn't resist responding, "Well, you've certainly been a Good Samaritan for us today!"

Within just a few minutes, the Johnsons were off the interstate and the tow truck driver led them past a sign at the entrance to a little village. The sign read, "Advent, Ohio, population 3, 427." And below it was one of those little crawling electronic messages. "Are you ready for Christmas? Only 15 more days!"

After reading the sign, the kids looked out their windows in anticipation of checking out the decorations in this town with such a 'Christmassy' name. But as they drove through the downtown business district they didn't see a thing— not a colored light, not a candy-cane hanging from a lamp post, not even a sign in the department store window announcing a pre-holiday sale. What a disappointment!

The tow truck led them into the lot of a modern-looking garage and the driver expertly backed their car into one of the bays. He led the Johnsons into a warm waiting area, and just a few minutes later he and Sam emerged from the shop. "Well, sir, what's the word?" Norm asked anxiously, noticing that the kids were beginning to get restless.

"Oh, you can call me Isaiah," said the mechanic, shaking Norm's hand. The word on your car is one of those good news-bad news kind of deals. The bad news is that your fuel injectors are all fouled up. I won't be able to get any parts until tomorrow morning. It might even be Tuesday before I can get everything you need. But the good news is that means you'll be able to stay for a bit and help us get ready for Christmas."

"They sure need a lot of help," mumbled Bill under his breath. "This is the dullest town I've ever seen!"

Susan spoke up. "Is there someplace near here where we can stay? Or maybe somewhere that we could rent a car for a couple of days?"

“Well,” replied Isaiah, “I can’t help you with a car rental, but there’s always room at the inn here in Advent.”

Sam offered to take them over, so they all piled back into his car and he drove them across the village square to a quaint little bed and breakfast establishment. They were greeted by a cheerful woman named Elizabeth, who led them upstairs to a set of rooms that were perfect for their needs, almost as if someone knew they were coming. Well, almost perfect. Bill had been thumbing away at his phone constantly since he had lost service, and it was still as dead as ever. To make things worse, the inn didn’t even have Wi-Fi.

After they had deposited their things in their rooms, they found Elizabeth downstairs again. “I would normally cook you dinner, and I still can if you’d prefer,” she said, “but tonight is our big Advent potluck supper down at St. John the Baptist Church, and you’re more than welcome to join us.”

“I guess that would be just fine,” Susan answered, “but if it’s a potluck don’t we have to bring a dish to pass?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Elizabeth said with a twinkle in her eye, “there’s always enough to go around here in Advent.”

“At least maybe now we’ll get to see some Christmas decorations, and maybe even sing a few carols, too,” Tina whispered to Bill as they went out the door, and walked across the square toward the big brightly-lit church building.

The Johnsons all noticed that the church parking lot was jammed with cars as they passed around it the toward the rear entrance of the church. It was a strange mixture of cars, too. Big luxury SUVs, rusty old pickup trucks, and tiny little hybrids were parked side by side. And they were especially surprised by the number of cars with out-of-state license plates. There were people here from all over America it seemed—and a surprising number of races and nationalities were represented here for such a small town so far off the beaten path in the middle of Ohio. And what was even more peculiar, Susan noticed, was that hardly anyone seemed to be carrying any dishes of food into the church for this potluck supper.

The peculiarities continued when they got inside. The first thing that Bill noticed when he walked into the big dining room was that it wasn’t decorated for Christmas either. And the things that were sitting around the room seemed pretty weird, too. In one corner in the front of the room, sat what looked at first like an pile of junk. But on closer examination Bill could see an old fashioned-plow like he’d seen before in books—the kind the farmers used to pull behind their horses through the Ohio fields. And on the floor down below the plow was a stack of what looked like rusty old swords from the Civil War or something. There were strange banners hanging on the walls, too. But except for the one that just said “Are you ready?” they didn’t look much like Christmas decorations, either. There was one with a picture of a tree stump with a little

green shoot growing up out of it. Another one had a bulldozer on it—it looked like an old picture from back when they were building the interstate. Still another had a wolf and a lamb. The strangest one of all had a picture of a little child holding a really big snake!

“Mom, this is too weird,” complained Tina, “Where’s the Christmas decorations?”

“Just be patient,” replied Susan, trying to keep her own questions in check. “Isaiah said we could *help* them get ready for Christmas. Maybe there’ll be a hanging of the greens or some caroling or something after supper.”

They found seats at a table with a group of people, many of whom said that they, too, had been driving down the interstate and had pulled off here in Advent for one reason or another. Each had been approached by one of the citizens and invited to stay for dinner, too. Several commented about how odd this place seemed—but the people were all so welcoming and nice.

After everyone was seated a rough looking man stood up and asked the group to join him in saying grace. He led them into a familiar old grace, one that even the kids knew. He said, “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest ...” But then he stopped in mid sentence and sat down.

Quickly, several people appeared carrying casseroles from the kitchen. After everyone had eaten their fill and had pitched in to clear the tables, the same rough-looking man who had led the grace stood again and began to speak. “My name is Pastor John, and I’m so happy that you came to our Advent dinner. Every year when we hold this dinner we never know who God is going to send our way, but every year we seem to have a room full of people. You just show up, somehow, every one of you with a different story—but God sends you so that we can help each other get ready for Christmas.

“A few years ago, the folks here in Advent were studying the Bible, and we got to wondering how our church’s namesake, John the Baptist, would have celebrated Advent. We talked and thought and prayed and studied some more and we ended up thinking that we should spend less time shopping and decorating and spend more time with each other and with getting ready to welcome Jesus. So we stopped decorating the church and the town—we’ll do that later as part of our Christmas celebration! And we began doing some other things to try to have a foretaste of the world the way Jesus came to make it.

“We started having this meal—we invite everyone to it who wants to come, and it always seems like a miracle but every year there’s enough food to go around. And even though we don’t advertise, it has gotten so that every year people literally come from east and west and south and north to eat together here—just like in the kingdom of God.

“We started making Advent a time of reconciliation – we all began paying attention to being reconciled with each other and with God. And now every year we use this month to straighten out our conflicts with each other—to heal up the little wounds before they become big ones. I spend more time now in Advent doing pastoral counseling than I do going to parties.

“Last year we got together some old swords from the Civil War, and we took them out to the forge at the historical site outside town and watched a blacksmith make them into that plow you see sitting up there. It was pretty amazing to witness those weapons of war transformed into an instrument of peace and prosperity. We’re not quite sure we’re ready to bring any wolves in yet, or let our little ones play with rattlesnakes—some symbols are better left as symbols. But we’ve been learning a lot about getting ready for Christmas.

“I’m the kind of person that thinks everything happens for a reason—and that makes me guess that if you showed up here tonight that was for a reason, too. Maybe there’s some reconciling you need to do—with God or with someone else. It might be a big thing, or might just be a little thing that could grow into a big thing if you don’t take care of it. But you know that’s what Jesus is coming for – to turn our hearts back toward each other.”

Pastor John’s voice faded into the background as Norm looked around the room. He could see a lot of heads nodding and a few eyes welling up with tears around that quiet room. He looked across the table at Susan and reached out and took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

Norm was startled from this reverie by the sound of chairs sliding away from the table and the shuffle of people moving toward the door. After a quiet walk back to the inn, Norm and Susan sat up through most of the night talking, and even the kids seemed different when they got up the next morning. Over breakfast, out of nowhere, Bill spoke up and said, “I’m sorry I was such a jerk about coming this weekend. I guess I’ve gotten a little bit too caught up in my own world. It was almost a blessing that we got stuck here last night.”

And not to be left out, Tina added, “And I feel bad that I dragged you off to the mall when I know Grandma really wanted to do stuff with me. Maybe we can try again after Christmas.”

They were all surprised when Isaiah called from the garage to say the car was ready. It turned out that their problem wasn’t so complicated after all. “But,” he said, “it was a good thing that you had it looked at now—if you had waited much longer, you could have had some big trouble somewhere down the road.” By late that morning the Johnsons were on the road again. As they left town they all smiled thoughtfully as they drove past a sign that said, “Thank you for visiting Advent, OH. Are you ready for Christmas now?”

In the car as they sped down the interstate, Bill looked up from his phone. “Dad, what exit did we get off to go to Advent yesterday?”

"It was exit 48A," Norm replied.

"Dad, according to this map on my phone. there is no Exit 48A on this road. And what's more, I can't find a town called Advent anywhere, either. Weird, huh? I wonder what that was all about?"

Rev. David A. Spaulding – First Presbyterian Church, Dixon – December 10, 2017