

Pausing in Advent by Caroline Coggins

I was on retreat recently in Hong Kong and there was a very small pool with eight turtles in it. It took me some days to notice, you have to slow down to see them. Their water was muddy, there was certainly no vista here, just the close company they kept with each other, and the bonus of the big shell that they could pull their heads in and out of. I liked the turtles, I watched them lean on each other to get up, rest on top of each other, they had that shell, but mostly their heads were out, steady and still, looking at me, as I looked at them, curiously. They seemed absorbed and present in their small world, except when I jumped up quickly one day, full of some internal noise, and they too fled from their rock, plopping back into the water. I had disturbed their universe, and they disappeared for cover. Having our known world disturbed is never easy.

A retreat is a particular time, seems simple enough, go away from the normal routines, from the usual sense of place and keep the silence to find the inner quiet. Then let surface what will. But the bed is too short for my frame, and I am restless, I want to roam the Island. The thought of being cooped up like the turtles is not attractive, although I admire their quality of mind.

Hong Kong is familiar, as a young woman I lived here in transit, restless and aching for another life. Now it is many years later and the advent wreath is here with its candle lit, and I come to wait on God, to be like one of those turtles, still. Nice idea, thinking I may have some control in this relationship, thinking these pains may have gone.

This year when I read the Annunciation what I notice are Mary's pauses, her response to the angels' avowal that she is favoured by God. But what she utters is that she is deeply perplexed. Imagine Mary, a young woman, now, suddenly, in God's presence told she is favoured. She pauses, perhaps for a moment, perhaps longer, as she goes inside like these turtles, to what she knows, her own world.



Then she is told she will conceive, she will carry the Christ, the saviour. Again the pause, how can this be? There is no longer Mary and her desire for God, there is Mary and God and their relationship. She pauses, the world must feel very strange to her now, unimaginable, and then in the midst, God's fingers reach out to her, to touch a 'yes' between both of them.

In these moments when we have no protection, no status or wealth, nothing except what emerges out of us in this pause, we can get a real and sharp feel of ourselves, and it is different to what comes out of us when we feel the world is our domain. Now made vulnerable, at last vulnerable to God, our pretences empty, a hand reaches out to us, unexpectedly, and it is almost too much, scoured as we are, surviving on scraps, a hand that knows us and an unbearable, but so needed warmth, envelopes us.

We are totally unprepared for this no matter how versed we are. And often in such situations and facing such challenges we can behave like the turtles, scatter and hide.

These challenges of living on the edge are not ones we usually leap toward: to be aged, disdained, ill, poor and perhaps not even Mary's experience of being chosen. Yet this is where we are met, our wounds bathed. Control is a fear soaked antidote to friendship and love.

The pauses reveal us, ordinary and wounded, afraid, afraid of love, of being known, of being not much.

I fear and know that the only way home to my creator is through my story, my life of yes's and no's, the hurts that have left me afraid, and the no's that have made me inflexible. It is in relationship where the wounds lie, and it is when we wait that we come to know how we have been waited for. The pains and fears that tear me are also where the balm lies. I am not forced only made ready. Joy is an outcome, but this indwelling love, happens by becoming all that shames and mortifies me and all that I secrete from myself is where God's hand touches.

This is God's time, and the most difficult thing to accept is that God is waiting on me even more than I am waiting on God. God waits on Mary, waits on us, whatever we are up to, whatever stories and pains we carry, whatever the state of lapse, or homelessness. That's what I think Advent is really about.

What we receive is a pathway to those who suffer, not as benefactors but as the same. Learning how to love ourselves, others, as we are loved by Him.

And the turtles, they only have each other in their little pond, and shells to crawl into when they need to turn their heads away, but then they will lean into each other again, help each other to climb to the rock in the sun, and sit there and look, just as they are.

Christ is born to us all, surprising us in the midst our littleness, pausing, we find the "Yes!" between us.