

“What do you do when you’ve been given a vision?”¹

I

Oscar Hijuelos – who won the Pulitzer Prize for one of his novels – died suddenly a couple of weeks ago at the age of 52. And if you follow these kinds of things, it’s interesting the number of news reports that have followed his death. Usually for such luminaries you find just an extended obituary. But for Hijuelos, news articles are still appearing about his work.

Recently, in the *Times*’ “On Religion” section, the writer talked about one of the author’s – as he says – “most fully achieved novels about religion” titled *Mr. Ives Christmas*. The book is actually a “parable about faith tested by tragedy.” But I mention it here because it’s also a story studded by shimmering visions – where God’s Presence penetrates the world around Ives – who is in one scene standing on the corner of Madison Avenue and 41st street in New York City – and “experiences a rapture.”

Hijuelos writes: “Then, not knowing whether to shout from ecstasy or fear, Ives looked up and saw the sun, glowing red and many times its normal size, and in all directions the very sky filled with four rushing, swirling winds, each defined by a different-colored powder like strong Asian spices ... spinning like a great pinwheel over Madison Avenue and Forty-first Street.

“Leaning back, nearly falling, Ives was on the verge of running for his life, when just like that, a great calm returned, the sun receding, the blue sky utterly tranquil. Then the traffic light clicked on and the light changed, traffic and commerce resuming as usual.”

Now apparently something like this vision had also really happened to the author, Hijuelos, in his adult life. And in an interview, he said that this book, *Mr. Ives Christmas*, was *his* answer to the question, “What do you do when you’ve been given a vision?”

What do you do. . .when you’ve been given ... a vision!

Now recently I've noticed a spate of stories – both written and in other media – stories about visions, about life after this life. Eban Alexander's *Proof of Heaven* is one – where he apparently dies and then comes back to tell about it. And just this past Sunday, Anderson Cooper had a special on CNN where he interviewed three people who had biologically died, had some experience of the “next world,” as they say, and then came back to report on their experience ... that profound sense of peace, of joy, of **real reluctance** to return to their lives in this world.

Now you may be sitting there asking yourself what this is all about ... and especially what this has to do with Advent – which we're now in the thick of this morning.

Well let's think about it for a few minutes and see together what this all might mean.

II

In the Gospel reading last week, we heard John the Baptist's cry in the desert, “repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!” And in the beautiful passages from Isaiah last week and today you have this picture of the peaceable Kingdom, where “wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid ... and a little child shall lead them ... where the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame shall leap like deer and the speechless sing for joy.” And thus we are ushered into the third Sunday of our Advent season.

Now John the Baptist's whole life is one lived out as a prophet – as a proclaimer, as one who looks into the future and demands – demands that those who hear him, live *now* for what is to come.

But here's the question: What *is* that, that is to come?

See, I think we spend our lives, you and me, we spend our lives basically waiting for what awaits us. And in our deepest hearts, I think we hope for some final, whole fulfillment.

One writer, recently reflecting on the Advent mantra, “Come, Lord Jesus,” says that this cry of “Come Lord Jesus” means that in your journey ... in this place ... and across your days, it means you live out of a kind of longing emptiness ... an

emptiness because yours and my *final* fulfillment is always to come, always beyond this horizon. And living in openness to “what is to come,” is exactly what the Gospel urges us to do when it says, “Keep awake!” Keep awake, keep aware, keep alive, keep attentive, keep alert!

So Advent means a “coming,” an “approach,” an inbreaking of the Word of God ... as we long for this Kingdom coming in the Advent journey of our lives.

‘Course, we hardly have a map to go by, do we? No, we only have a vague way marked by the wild rantings of prophets ... and a path of love marked out on our way by Jesus. But let’s assume that that shadowy mystery beyond the span of your years – glimpsed by Hijuelos and others – let’s assume that that mystery does turn out to be the real thing, the real country ... envisioned by Ives on the corner of Madison and 41st.

And so what if then your earthly days are just fragmented signposts for what lies ahead at the end of it all? How would you live ... then? How would you live now? Good questions, yes? So let’s think further about this Advent in our lives.

III

Someone reminded me recently of a quote that I’d shared with him that went “how you live today ... is how you live your life.” That’s scary, isn’t it? How you live today ... is how you live your life. But maybe one of the greatest gifts of the Christian life is that God never tires of offering you the opportunity to begin again.

See, Advent reminds you that the kingdom announced by John the Baptist – that Kingdom that has come near – is not like a train that you either catch on its way through town ... or miss it altogether. No, the Kingdom is more like a comet that blazes regularly into view, lighting up the sky and taking your breath away – something like Mr Ives’ vision ... penetrating your daily time.

Now time itself can be a fierce force in our lives, can’t it? I try to stay ahead of it, make my lists, cross off the too-many-things to do. I try to manage my time efficiently, aware of time running out, not wanting to waste a minute of it. But now let’s slow down a bit ... and think.

Is this God's intention for you and me? For time to threaten us, hound us, haunt us, scrambling like hamsters in our cage? No, I think that God means for this world's time to be a sign of God's hope *in* us, God's belief in *us* ... that we can change ... and God gives us time to do it.

So with each new year, I believe that God extends to you and me a fresh chance to become the self God calls you to be – a better version of yourself – to try again to be guided by love, try again to be guided by mercy, to crave justice, to be present to others, to live fully awake to God's Presence in your life.

So as one year in your life gives way to another, you're invited to give way – to seek forgiveness ... to *offer* forgiveness, to raise your face, raise your hopes to God's kingdom where weapons of war are reshaped for human flourishing, and violent ways are unlearned ... to wait every minute for the coming of God in your life.

And I also believe that even when you have let your world shrink to the size of your to-do list, even maybe when you're asleep, some part of you ... deep inside ... some part of you is awake and waiting ... reaching out for God ... even when the rest of you is too distracted to notice ... reaching out to God as God reaches out to you and me ... not just once a year, of course, but each new week ... each new day ... each new minute.

So finally. My final question:

Let's say you don't have a vision like Ives ... or ... even if you do. How do you translate God's Presence in your life to living in the coming Kingdom now? How?

Well, here's my suggestion. Let me suggest that when you get up each morning, you say to yourself, "So, I have one more day! What a surprise! What a gift! So what will I do with today? 'Cause the time that stretches before me here is a gift, an assignment, a grace ... a judgment."

What will you do, what will *God* do with your time? Well, let me give you some hints. See, to your right and your left. Someone's hurting. Someone's in pain, someone's in grief, someone's struggling. Even those who seem the most cheerful

and like they've got it all together ... don't be fooled. I've seen altogether too many of those folks fall apart. And all they ever wanted, all you and I ever wanted, was to be healed with the loving touch of another.

So if this world, if this nation, if you and I as a community are to roll back the darkness of this world as we wait for the world that *is coming*, I think Advent's the time to do it. A new year, a new beginning, a time when darkness begins to slip ... at least a little ... beginning with you – standing with Mr. Ives on the corner of *this* world's Madison and 41st ... or Broad and 24th ... experiencing with him the even more real world swirling around, glimpsing “light shifting here and there, the vibrancy of things” held by God. “In one slip of a second ... *anything* ... anything seems possible.”

What do you do when you've been given a vision? You turn around ... and you believe that the good news that you are loved is gooder than you ever dared hope ... and that to believe in that good news, to live out of it and toward it, is of all the glad things in this world ... the gladdest thing of all.

Amen and come ... Lord Jesus.

1. Resources used: *Pulpit Resource* (Vol. 1 (4), for year A (William Willimon, Ed.); *Synthesis* for Advent 1, 2, and 3; “Keep awake by love,” by Stephanie Paulsell, *Christian Century*, December 1, 2009; *Telling Stories, Compelling Ftores*, by William Bausch; and *Secrets in the Dark* by Frederick Buechner.