The images and voices lifting off the pages of our upcoming Cycle B Advent readings can be dizzying. They tumble by us week after week, Old and New Testament selections so rich and complex that we can barely digest them.

From the writings attributed to Isaiah, Samuel, Mark, Peter, and Paul, we hear proclaimed almost too much to fathom:

Pleading. “...we have all withered like leaves...”

Praise. “...we are the clay and you the potter...”

Admonitions. “Be watchful! Be Alert!”

“Comfort! Give comfort to my people.”

A voice crying out, “Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!”

Warnings. “The day of the Lord will come like a thief...”

A people awaiting, “...new heavens and a new earth.”

The desert. John the Baptist shouting, “Prepare the way of the Lord...”

The waters of the Jordan. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.”

Brothers and sisters, “Rejoice always... Do not quench the Spirit.”

A handmaid. An angel announcing, “And behold, Elizabeth... for nothing will be impossible for God.”

A pregnant Mary.

For parish ministers responsible for preparing the worship environment for this season, the Advent scriptures provide a stimulus for considering anew how they might use visual art in the domus ecclesia, the house of their church. How might it welcome the faithful to enter into the amazing array of images and metaphors that our Advent scriptures offer? How might it stir people to contemplate deeply even one Advent metaphor and to be open to whatever might arise in their hearts? How might visual art stop people in their tracks as they dash headlong toward nativity and surprise them with a glimpse of absolute mystery already present, yet still awaited? Peter Mazar provides a wealth of suggestions that no art and environment committee or liturgy team should miss (1995). For Advent, he urges us to realize the “decidedly mystical dimension” of this season.

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Re-discover Treasures in Plain Sight

How might new uses of visual art for Advent come about? Ideally, members of a liturgy or art and environment team would start with their own prayerful engagement with the scripture, songs, and liturgical texts of the season. Following Jesus’ exhortation, “Be watchful! Be alert!” they would do well to look around their own worship and other parish spaces for forgotten visual treasures.

In highly decorated and ornamented North American churches built along the lines of Romanesque, Gothic or Baroque European cathedrals, parish leaders may re-discover and emphasize for the assembly stained-glass and other two- and three-dimensional images already in the space that echo the Advent readings. Preachers could call worshipers’ attention to art that depicts the Annunciation or Mary and Elizabeth’s visitation. They might spotlight an image of the pregnant Our Lady of Guadalupe, not only because of her feast in December, but also because the very metaphor of pregnancy is so appropriate to this season of anticipation and expectation. A church with an image or statue of Mary under the title of the Immaculate Conception could also work with this metaphor, Mazar reminds us, since Mary’s evident pregnancy is typically part of its iconography (216). Worship spaces containing visual representations of St. John the Baptist at the River Jordan could likewise take advantage of art already in plain sight.

In some worship spaces, taken-for-granted images associated with Advent already are in place and can serve as a visual focus for preaching and continuing contemplation. Preachers can—and I would suggest, should—take advantage of their presence.

A New Option for Advent Art and Environment

But what about other worship spaces bereft of visual art? Many post-Vatican II church buildings were designed and constructed in the modern liturgical aesthetic of “noble simplicity” and exhibit minimal decorative or iconographic elements. In such cases, those responsible for creating an Advent atmosphere may find seasonal art can nobly serve.

Environment and art committees working within modern architectural spaces with expanses of bare walls or with installed media screens may want to consider a relatively new option: media art. Still or moving images can be projected onto light-colored wall surfaces, hanging or draped cloths, or even architectural features such as pillars, ceilings, and air conditioning ducts. Since the late 1960s, slide projectors have worked reliably for projecting photographs for meditation in liturgies. These days, a parishioner may own or may be able to borrow a video projector for this same purpose.

Alternatively, VCRs and video monitors could be arranged in a cluster, with the screens at various levels, to create a video installation dedicated to the sights and sounds evocative of Advent. Media students, teachers, or artists from a local art school might be willing to help a team of parishioners to develop this new approach to liturgical art.

A few years ago, a parish photographer at the Church of the Good Shepherd in suburban Cincinnati, Sister Tecla Jaehnen, developed a poignant Advent media meditation for that church’s media screen. Run before the Sunday liturgies during the prelude, the images showed the joy of the people who in the previous year had received Christmas presents from the truckload of gifts the parishioners had donated.
These photographs, well composed and skillfully edited into a slide presentation, ran silently and repeatedly so that parishioners would encounter them as they assembled. In the weeks parishioners were bringing in the presents they had once again promised, this media art echoed the Isaiah passage for the Third Week of Advent: “. . . he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted . . . ” (Isaiah 61:1).

Perhaps teams of young people and adults, confirmation classmates, or families might work together to create media art that takes its cue from Advent’s scriptural images or songs. Such metaphorical art might include well-shot, artfully edited video footage of local streams and rivers; withered leaves and barren trees; the changing colors of a winter’s sunset or an awakening dawn; a potter shaping clay on her wheel; highways and pathways; or pregnant women of every color and culture.

“Advent seems to require the backdrop of night and the subtlety and mystery of darkness,” Peter Mazar suggests, an atmosphere “often imagined to shine with distant lights” (206). It calls for celestial imagery and stars. To fill that bill, liturgy teams might explore the stunning cinematography on the DVD Baraka: A World Beyond Words. Shot on 70mm film in twenty-four countries on six continents, this cinematic work offers haunting footage of rotating starfields, an eclipse, a sunrise, and other wonders of creation suitable to inspire Advent reflection upon the promise of “a new heaven and a new earth” (2 Pet 3:13). But, perhaps, its best use might be in compelling worshipers to “Be watchful! Be alert!” (Mark 13:33) Mazar writes that “seasonal materials are meant to summon us to face reality” (5). Baraka, meaning “blessing,” provides images of people around the world—respectful, reverent, and beautiful, though often also heart-wrenching. Shown during a time of reflection in a liturgy on the Second Sunday of Advent, these images could well challenge worshipers to ask themselves how in this world “kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss” (Ps 85:11).

Of course, psalms, songs, and texts for Advent evening services and reconciliation services could also provide the starting point for parishioners who volunteer to shoot or to locate single photographs to be projected as images for contemplation. The early darkness of an Advent night presents possibilities for media projection otherwise not possible in most churches during the day because of sunlight that floods the space.

An Invitation to Become Mystics

Regardless of the media of visual art employed in helping to create the environment for Advent liturgies, whether it is art already created or newly created, discernment still is a critical requirement. Questions liturgical and aesthetic apply. In the case of Advent, leaders can ask themselves, “Does this visual art serve to invite worshipers to imbibe more deeply the heady scriptures of the season? Is the art metaphorical and multivalent, rather than didactic and one-dimensional? Can the art open a window in our hearts so that we might catch a glimpse of the mystery we are and the Mystery that we celebrate?”

Theologian Karl Rahner predicted that “. . . the devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced’ something,” or such people “will cease to be anything at all.” (15). Visual art can invite those who create it, those who choose to display it, and those who encounter it in worship to experience “something,” the Mystery whom we cele-
brate in Advent as God-for-us. Using visual art is no guarantee that worshipers will have that experience. For some people present, though, seasonal visual art can perhaps “Prepare the way . . .”

References


