

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 10, 2023

ISAIAH 40:1-11 | PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13 | 2 PETER 3:8-15A | MARK 1:1-8

We're spending some time this Advent putting our readings in conversation with some important but lesser-known voices from the Christian tradition. Last week, we put the Isaiah and Mark readings in conversation with Simone Weil's ideas about paying attention. And this week, I want to introduce you to a woman named Madeleine Delbr el.¹

Like Weil, Delbr el grew up in France in the early twentieth century. Since the French Revolution, France had been a predominantly secular country. Delbr el's social circle was mostly atheists and agnostics, and the neighborhood where Delbr el spent most of her life had a large population of Communists. In her early life, she was very much a product of this environment. While studying at the Sorbonne, she summed up her religious views this way. "God is dead... long live death!"



But when she was around twenty, her close-knit circle started unraveling. Her fianc ee inexplicably decided to join a Dominican order instead of marrying her. Her parents split up, and her family life fell apart. And she returned to the question of God that she'd long ago set aside. Looking back on her conversion experience, she writes, "By reading and reflecting, I found God; but by praying, I believed that God found me and that he is living reality, and that we can love him in the same way we love a person." After her conversion, Delbr el set up a hospitality house where she and other women advocated for worker rights while also providing food and housing. She was sort of like a French Dorothy Day.

And this is where I think Delbr el's story goes from being admirable to revelatory. Because there's a debate happening within the church at this point about how to witness in society, particularly to those claiming allegiance to these other metanarratives and identities. Think about the neighborhood she grew up in in which the gospel is seen as archaic, irrelevant, and meaningless. What posture should the church take? How should the body of Christ live? What message should they focus on proclaiming?

This is also what the prophet wonders in today's reading from Isaiah. The people have just been deported to Babylon when the prophet is called to witness. "A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?'" After all, the prophet laments, "the people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field." In other words, the prophet asks, what am I supposed to say to these people? What new word will be able to bring them to life?

These were the same questions people were asking in Delbr el's time. And they're questions we may find ourselves asking, too. Even if we live in a different social context—more apathetic than antagonistic—the questions about what to proclaim and how to proclaim it are very much live questions.

One possibility is to just repeat church teaching in a louder voice. If people aren't listening, it's probably because they didn't hear you. Incidentally, we had a good example of this a couple of weeks ago when we celebrated Christ the King Sunday. Christ the King Sunday began when Pope Pius XI, a contemporary of Delbr el, was frustrated that people weren't taking the kingship of Jesus seriously anymore. And so he said, *Fine. We'll put a day on the calendar to remind all these people that Jesus is the real king.*

Delbr el has a different take on this. And she says that instead of just repeating ourselves in a louder voice, we need to actually listen to people. We need to understand what's going on in their lives. And we need to understand why people find these other narratives so compelling. Then and only then, can we

¹ This is a good summary of her life: "Who Is Madeleine Delbr el—the 'French Dorothy Day' Pope Francis Made Venerable This Weekend? | America Magazine," accessed December 5, 2023, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/02/01/who-madeleine-delbrel-french-dorothy-day-pope-francis-made-venerable-weekend>.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481

(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

convey why following Jesus makes a difference in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors. In other words, we need to offer people a different vision of life.

To put it another way, if people knew nothing about Jesus or God or Christian practice other than their encounters with us, what would they say about God? Would they say that God is judgmental and insecure? Would they say that God is self-interested and exclusionary? Or would they say that God is forgiving and generous? That God is caring and available? Delbr el’s big insight was that it isn’t enough to just tell people about God. The Holy Spirit empowers us to show people God.

We, like John the Baptist, invite people to repentance. To join us in a different pattern of life. To a way of life ordered in the mercy of God. For Delbr el, the hospitality house was the vision of what that new way of life. We don’t just tell people that God is loving. We love people. We don’t just tell people that God cares for the hungry. We care for the hungry. We don’t just tell them that God forgives. We forgive. While we can’t create faith in other people—only God can do that—we can show people the difference the love of Christ makes in the world. Our service makes the gospel intelligible.

This is exactly how God instructs the prophet Isaiah to serve. What should you say? Well, God replies, “Get you up to a high mountain... lift up your voice with strength... [and] say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” We—lay people, in particular—have been commissioned just like the prophet Isaiah to bring God’s love to a weary world. Not just to tell people *That’s what God is like*. But to show people *Here is what God is like*.

This is how Delbr el describes it in one of her books. This is long, but I’m going to do the whole thing because it’s really beautiful and better than anything I’m going to say. She writes:

From a sand dune, dressed in white, the [traditional] missionary overlooks an expanse of lands filled with unbaptized peoples. From the top of a long subway staircase, dressed in an ordinary suit or raincoat, we [ordinary people] overlook, on each step, during this busy rush-hour time, an expanse of heads, of bustling heads, waiting for the door to open... Lord, Lord... My eyes, my hands, my mouth are yours. This sad lady in front of me: here is my mouth for you to smile at her. This child so pale he’s almost gray: here are my eyes for you to gaze at him. This man so tired, so weary: here is my body so that you may give him my seat, here is my voice so that you may say softly to him, ‘Please sit down.’ This smug young man, so dull, so hard: here is my heart, that you may love him, more strongly than he has ever been loved before.

Delbr el offered her life to God. And in offering it to God, she offered it to her neighbors. And it’s the same for us. Whenever we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we offer our thanks and praise and declare to God, saying, *Here is my life*. So that sent from Christ’s table, our lives can proclaim with Isaiah and Delbr el and the entire communion of saints, *Here is our God*.

Joseph Schattauer Paill e, Pastor