

In one sense, today's story begins at another church named Advent. In another, it begins when a poor young woman visited her cousin and offered a song of praise to God that Christians repeat every day. In yet another, it begins in the heart of God.

Have any of you heard of the Church of the Advent in Boston? Its reputation in some circles is such that some people call it "The Advent." That's because it is a flagship parish of the Anglo-Catholic movement. That Advent is best known for ritual, music, and architecture that imitate the pre-Vatican-II Roman Catholic Church, although they are just as much an Episcopal church as this Advent is. That Advent, however, doesn't just present a specific aesthetic; they also teach the doctrines and perspectives of their movement, including the inherent goodness and sacredness of the created world, which by definition includes every human being.

Sometimes people are surprised to learn that Anglo-Catholics have a rich and proud tradition of activism and advocacy for marginalized, oppressed, and disfavored people, even though it grows directly out of their principles and ethos. People caricature them as out-of-touch elitists obsessed with the details of ritual, aesthetics, and history, and while you can find examples of such people, most Anglo-Catholics have a robust social consciousness, even if they don't draw attention to the fact.

Which brings us to Jonathan. I don't know why he was there on Easter Day 1962, but it's not entirely surprising that his worship at that Advent would cause him to have a conversion experience — and by the way, conversion experiences aren't just for evangelicals; Anglo-Catholics can have them, too. Jonathan didn't just discern a vocation to the priesthood and enroll in seminary; he also developed a powerful devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the daily prayer life of the church. These reinforced each other, as the Song of Mary, which comprises tonight's Gospel, is also sung or said every evening in the Daily Office.

All of these experiences rendered Jonathan particularly open to Martin Luther King Jr.'s national appeal for support of efforts to register Black voters in the heart of the segregated South, the so-called "Black Belt." Ritual, tradition, mysticism, and action were not opposed, as we sometimes assume, but rather intertwined so as to render each other stronger, like a many-stranded cord. Likewise, Jonathan did not only help with voter registration, but also worked in a health clinic, worked to integrate a local Episcopal church, and joined the famous Selma to Montgomery march. Jonathan himself wrote,

I lost fear in the black belt when I began to know in my bones and sinews that I had been truly baptized into the Lord's death and Resurrection, that

in the only sense that really matters I am already dead, and my life is hid with Christ in God. I began to lose self-righteousness when I discovered the extent to which my behavior was motivated by worldly desires and by the self-seeking messianism of Yankee deliverance! The point is simply, of course, that one's motives are usually mixed, and one had better know it. As Judy and I said the daily offices day by day, we became more and more aware of the living reality of the invisible "communion of saints"—of the beloved community in Cambridge who were saying the offices too, of the ones gathered around a near-distant throne in heaven — who blend with theirs our faltering songs of prayer and praise. With them, with black men and white men, with all of life, in Him Whose Name is above all the names that the races and nations shout, whose Name is Itself the Song Which fulfills and "ends" all songs, we are indelibly, unspeakably ONE.

I considered ending this sermon there. I wish I could. But unfortunately, that is not where Jonathan's story ends. He decided to go to nearby Lowndes County, which was 80% Black, and had no Black registered voters. He considered it a challenge. The locals called it " 'Bloody Lowndes' for the level of violence used to enforce race relations."\*

On this day in 1965, Jonathan and his companions were jailed on trumped-up charges following a protest in the town of Fort Deposit. The tiny town's jail could not hold them all, so they were transferred to the jail in Hayneville, an even smaller town, but the county seat. Six days later, civil rights lawyers won their release, but they knew they were in danger. "While waiting for rides back to Selma, [Jonathan] and [a Roman Catholic] priest, Richard Morrisroe, and two African American women, including Ruby Sales, went to a local store to buy drinks. Tom Coleman, who worked for the state highway department in the area, had been playing dominoes at the clerk's office. He heard that the prisoners were going to be released and armed himself with a shotgun. .... When Daniels entered, Coleman told them the store was closed and [demanded that they leave with a vulgar threat I will not repeat]. [Jonathan] pushed Ruby Sales, whom he was walking with, out of the way, and Coleman shot Daniels, killing him. When Morrisroe tried to run with the other woman, he was shot, too, but survived."\*

Jonathan's murder shocked the nation, increasing support for the Civil Rights Movement. His murderer's acquittal by an all-white jury did the same. Martin Luther King hailed Jonathan as a martyr, saying, "one of the most heroic Christian deeds of which I have heard in my entire ministry was performed by Jonathan Daniels."

Which raises the great question of why God would allow such a thing to happen, why

God allows evil in the world. There is truth in the saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church,” but it does not follow that God causes people to become martyrs. In the translation of the Psalter that Jonathan knew, it is written, “right dear in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.”\*\* The only person God ever planned on dying for the sake of the world was Jesus. However, God does long to grow in us, and cultivate our growth into the full stature of Christ, and the more mature we are in our faith, the more likely we are to act in a Christ-like manner out of habit, or instinct, without even thinking. Jonathan was a young man, but he was already a mature Christian; he had already internalized the divine messages of justice and equality expressed in tonight’s readings and many other places in Scripture.

But again, why is there evil? Why do bad things happen to good people? The whole point of creation was to allow things to happen on their own, which includes people making evil choices, without God defeating the very purpose of creation by intervening — but God is always bringing good out of evil, sometimes far greater good. Just as God did not destroy the waters of chaos to create the world but reined them in so they would serve God’s larger plan, so too does God allow evil to exist in this world, but bends it to God’s will, which is love, grace, life, and liberation for all. That’s why the commemorations of martyrs are classified as feast days, just like the commemorations of saints who died of natural causes.

Jonathan’s heroic death would be enough to secure his legacy. The increased support for Civil Rights would certainly be enough. But did you wonder whatever happened to the girl, Ruby Sales, whose life he saved? Ruby is still alive today, which reminds us of just how recently the Civil Rights Movement happened. It would be an understatement to say that her experience affected her — she was “Unnerved and unable to speak significantly for seven months [but she was] determined to attend the trial of Daniels’ murderer... and to testify on behalf of her slain colleague. Her perseverance moved her to a career of social activism.”†

Ruby went on to college and graduate school, “taught courses on the civil rights movement and African American women’s history at the University of Maryland... served as director... of Black Women’s Voices and Images , an initiative to wed research to action on issues affecting black women... [and then director of] Women of All Colors, coordinating a broad coalition of progressive organizations to work on issues affecting all women.”† Later she enrolled in the same seminary Jonathan had entered, earning a Master’s in Divinity in 1998. She launched her own nonprofit, SpiritHouse, and also serves as an author and commentator.

Just as today’s story began, in a sense, long before Jonathan was born, it ends years

after he died. Ruby can't be canonized because she is still alive, but God is a God of the living, not of the dead, so even though it's somebody else's feast day, I will give Ruby the last word. I suspect that Jonathan won't mind. In a 2016 interview, she said,

I grew up believing that I was a first-class human being and a first-class person, and our parents were spiritual geniuses who were able to shape a counterculture of black folk religion that raised us from disposability to being essential players in society. And it also taught us something serene about love. "I love everybody. I love everybody. I love everybody in my heart." And so "hate" was not anything in our vocabulary. .... I became involved in the Southern freedom movement not merely because I was angry about injustice, but because I love the idea of justice. So it's where you begin your conversation. So most people begin their conversation with "I hate this" — but they never talk about what it is they love. And so I think that we have to begin to have a conversation that incorporates a vision of love with a vision of outrage. And I don't see those things as being over and against each other. I actually see them — you can't talk about injustice without talking about suffering. But the reason why I want to have justice is because I love everybody in my heart. ††

\*<https://www.alabamaheritage.com/from-the-vault/remembering-jonathan-myrick-daniels>

\*\*Psalm 116:13b, Coverdale translation

† <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/ruby-nell-sales-39>

††<https://onbeing.org/programs/ruby-sales-where-does-it-hurt/>