

RISING GENERATIONS

THE UPPER ROOM

Finding Each Other and Finding God— One Can at a Time

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Advent rises again, a light in the darkness, reminding us of who we are: pilgrims belonging to the Christ child, who grew, loved, died, and rose again. In the small, publicly-funded Catholic high school where I work as a chaplain, the story of Jesus' birth, of God born in the manger, still enthalls.

Hospitality and community count if our students are going to develop a sense of who they are and where they belong. But how do we build community and make Advent meaningful to individuals who are walking their own journey and searching for the manger in their own ways? Like Mary and Joseph, our students meet challenges along the way and question the direction they are walking. Some have loving parents, grandparents, cousins, and friends. Others have guardians and holes in their hearts that no one has ever filled. Some are naïve, optimistic, and happy. Others are angry, addicted, and hurting. We want all of them to journey to Bethlehem together.

Cans

Years ago, we decided to mark Advent with a Canned Food Drive. We would collect cans of food and donate them to the city food bank. In the year 2000, our goal was to raise 2000 cans. Then we would come together like the magi and offer what treasure we could to the neediest among us. The idea was based on our understanding that all of Christ's teachings about loving neighbors are found in the story of his birth in a manger, the meanest and homeliest of circumstances.

The students participated in the food drive, and their pride in what they could accomplish surprised everyone. Someone came up with the idea of a trophy, made from a battered coffee can, for the class that collected the most cans. No prize or incentive other than the "big can trophy" was offered.

It got better.

Every year, the number of cans continued to grow. The students went door-to-door with their teachers and on their free time. They ran raffles, held bake sales, busked outside grocery stores, challenged the community to fill police cruisers with food, and staffed tables at the mall. Every year, they came up with more ideas to collect cans. Rallies were held, songs written, businesses petitioned. The cans kept coming in, and the prayer services kept filling up.

Still it got better.

You would think that youth living in poorer circumstances would feel left out, as if they had nothing to contribute. But through our canned food drive, the students felt empowered. They didn't need to be rich to write to a local business, to canvass a neighborhood asking for donations, or to organize a talent show. They didn't

need to be poor either. They needed only a common goal and a companion on the journey, a friend, a member of the community. With someone by their side, they started to believe that anything was possible, that messiahs might well be born in stables, that together they could change the world.

Each of us encounters the Christ child one to one, but we come to the manger in the company of others. The shepherds, the wise men, and the angels journeyed in groups. Mary and Joseph traveled as a pair. In relationships, we discover faith; and in compassion, we discover love. Each vision of God builds on every other. We are all part of the Advent journey. We are in this together.

It keeps on getting better.

Taking the cans to the food bank was easy when there were a few thousand. But when the number of cans broke 25,000, we needed help. The people of our small community reached out to us. Without being asked, local businesses and clubs began dropping off checks at the school. They offered cargo vans and trailers. They opened their hearts to us and taught us more about compassion.

Our school becomes alive during Advent. No one knows how many cans will be collected. The hallways fill with food, anticipation mounts, and hope soars. The experience, my students tell me, is transformative. A deep connection to the Advent season marks these dark December days. The night, the stars, the hidden possibilities, the future yet to be unveiled are all symbolized by the ongoing canned food drive.

Last year, our school broke the 50,000-can record. In a city of 22,000 people, that's more than two cans for every man, woman, and child. The food drive is like the story of the loaves and fishes, of the talents grown, of the light in the stable that becomes light for the world. Suddenly, the Advent story: A helpless child in the manger becomes God before us, the powerless empowering one, the giver. In reaching out to one another and to the community, the students grasp something beyond themselves that can only be found when they leave their own needs behind. Beyond the complexity of demands and temptations in their lives, they discover a community of people they can claim as their own. This is their school. This is their town. This is their Advent.

Dig Deeper

Think about how you connect with the Christmas story. What helps you discover the Christ child in the manger? Who travels with you to Bethlehem? Thank God for the pilgrimage of Advent in your life.