

I'm sure you have all had that experience of stumbling into an old song or story, essay or poem that was once the hottest thing going, only to be relegated to time and history. Suddenly, it reappears and resurrects all the feelings and resonances that made you love it in the first place. An encounter with the 2004 collaboration by U2 lead singer, Bono, and ex-Eurythmic, Dave Stewart, [*American Prayer*](#), recently brought me back to the powerful imagery of their poetic lyricism. Used as an Obama ad in the 2008 election, it *really* brings you back. However, the focus for--and timing of-- the Bono and Stewart song transcended politics in a way that I think is hard for us to recognize--or even imagine--today.

The end of the video is deeply moving. It is footage of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I've been to the mountaintop" speech given on April 3, 1968. King presciently recognizes that he may not get to the Promised Land with those for whom he advocates, but he, "knows that we as a people will get to the Promised Land." King was assassinated the next day. The song closes with the refrain: *If you get to the top of the mountain/Will you tell me what you see?/If you get to the top of the mountain/Remember me.* You are drawn into the deep resonance of the metaphor of the mountaintop and the Promised Land. The place where one communes with God, and the place of God's promise fulfilled. You also recognize the longing that is still a part of our life, because the mountaintop and the Promised Land continue to elude us.

I often think that Advent embodies this profound tension of realization and longing. Christ already present, *and* Christ yet to come. We confirm this truth with the Aramaic expression *Maranatha*. Read one way, Maranatha expresses the declarative: *The Lord has Come*. Read another way, Maranatha takes on the exhortative: *Come, Lord!* We live between the poles of arrival and journey, between recognition and uncertainty, between assurance and hope. The word *penumbra* or the lighter part that exists before the impassible and unknowable darkness is an apt image for this experience and this time. Indeed, Advent is a penumbra. We see, but not fully. We know, but only in part. We move in hope, but not always certain.

American Prayer leads to King's speech crescendo with imagery that is rich with religious meaning. One stanza exhorts us, "Let's not kick at the darkness. Make the lights brighter." And with two simple phrases you are invited into an exploration of where you concentrate your energies and efforts. While there certainly are those things that we oppose, are we so caught up in battling the darkness that we lose sight of the light? Do we do so to such a degree that we lose the light for the darkness? Or is it possible to focus on that which brings light and life and give ourselves over to that engagement? I doubt that it is ever that simple, that neat. Yet, the distinction resonates.

Further on, "This is the church you can't see," invites you into a deeper reflection on what exactly is church? And how is it that we can't see it but it exists? Certainly, during this pandemic, we have been pressed to understand church in a new way. Thankfully, the structures

that can so easily inspire yet also become idols have been relegated to the sidelines. We have the opportunity to consider church in another way. The old Bible School song, “The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is the people,” comes to mind. And, perhaps, that is the church that you can’t see. No longer church signified by those who attend a particular building on Sunday. Church now defined by the people who embody the promise and hope of God in the midst of the penumbra, Advent, life.

Which is what the end of Advent commemorates: the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Incarnation. God in the midst of life, with all its beauty and horror, love and hatred, joy and sorrow. So, also, Advent leaves us with tension. We wait for the fulfillment that we once glimpsed yet know is not yet fully realized. Again, mountaintop and Promised Land. Arrival and journey, recognition and uncertainty, assurance and hope. Maybe not seeing the church says more about our blindness than the ongoing promise that God continues to move and shape it even when we wouldn’t even know it. If you are open to this reality, well, then your life will surely never be dull. For at the heart of your living and being is the affirmation of King, “that we [certainly, the African American community, and in the heart of God, all people] will get to the Promised Land.” Amen. Maranatha!