

They say when Woody Allen makes a movie he never gives his actors a complete script. They get just the parts of the film that pertains to their character. They find out about the rest of the movie when it opens. Actors comply because Allen has a reputation for making critically acclaimed films.

His approach is a metaphor for life. God has given each of us only the part of the script that pertains to our character. We meet some characters, but never others. We don't know how the parts relate, but we accept our part because God has a good reputation.

Still, it gets frustrating. God throws us a curve ball and we cannot figure out why. A tragedy happens to a close friend and we have no explanation. We receive good fortune and we're not sure how it fits with other parts of our life. Sometimes we question whether God really knows the whole script.

The scriptures we hear for advent and Christmas intend to show that God does know the whole script. In the stories of Jesus' birth, for example, Matthew and Luke interrupt several times to point out an event that happened in order to fulfill a prophecy from the old testament. They don't just tell about the birth of Jesus. They interpret that birth. They say the way it happened proclaims this mystery: that God had a plan. What you see in the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of that plan.

Our second reading today is the conclusion of Paul's letter to the Romans. The praise it offers God makes the same point. Paul says God had a secret which only slowly came to light. That secret now is evident when we look at the prophets, and it should also be plain to the whole world. Paul writes, "God can strengthen you according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages but now manifested through the prophetic writings and, according to the command of the eternal God, made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith." God's plan has revealed what it once concealed: Jesus Christ. When we feel like God's plan isn't working, we take comfort in the humbling insight that the plan is bigger than the part we play.

The church affirms this method in many subtle ways. Almost every Sunday the old testament reading foreshadows the gospel. Even the responsorial psalm shows that what happened in the past blossoms in the future. Whenever our hierarchy issues a document, they fill it with references to past documents, to show that the new one fulfills themes that existed all along. The joke among people who notice this trend is that if there's ever a document that admits women to the priesthood, it will begin with the words, "As we have always taught."

Especially during advent, the scriptures point out that the present includes the past. Our belief is that God planned it that way. We cannot always see the complete picture, and that is why we need advent. It reminds us of our hope.