’You know, if it turns out that there is a God, I don't think that he's evil. I think that the worst you can say about him is that, basically, he’s an underachiever.’ That’s the judgement of the Jewish actor and director Woody Allen.¹ I think he's put his finger on the working assumption of a great many Christians today.

Let me explain. When Christians lament that churchgoing is less common in this country than once it was, they often get frustrated with people who don’t come, but they seldom get cross with God, who seems not to have made the faith transparent. When Christians are embarrassed that the church is so slow to adjust to contemporary norms about gender and sexuality, they often get frustrated with Christians of another stripe, but tend to refrain from berating the God who left such an ambiguous legacy in the Bible. Doesn’t this bear out Woody Allen’s claim – that we assume God’s an underachiever and it’s for us to do the real work of redemption? I want to suggest to you that not only is Woody Allen’s view widely held among Christians, but that it’s correct – if you adopt what we might call a conventional view of God. But I want go on to suggest that view of God is wrong, and that if we adjust our view of God, we’ll see that Woody Allen’s wrong too.

Here’s what we might call a conventional story of God. God had too much love to be contained within the Trinity. So God wanted to be in companionship. God made the creation out of abundance of joy, but also sought within the creation a companion to share that joy. Finding that companion was no easy matter, but in Abraham God planted a seed that grew and grew. God delivered the chosen people from Egypt and made a covenant with them. All looked set fair, with the covenant in place and Promised Land and king and temple as its outward signs. But disobedient people lost land, king, and temple, and went into exile in Babylon, and stayed there 50 years – and even when many of them returned they didn’t have a king and they didn’t govern the land and the ark of the covenant was lost and it was only a partial restoration of the glory they’d left behind.

But God visited the people in their internal exile and came in human form. In signs and words Christ proclaimed that the exile was finally over, and that God’s promise to redeem the whole world through Israel was fulfilled. By raising Christ from the dead God changed the notion of exile from Babylon to earth and changed the notion of Promised Land from a restored territory to a heavenly destiny. Henceforward the tension in Christian life is between material, transitory earth and spiritual, eternal heaven, and the question always is, ‘How much of the limitless reserves of heaven is God prepared to bring forward into the current account of earth? Given the exponential everlasting inheritance, how big is the tangible downpayment?’ The prayer is always, ‘Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,’ and the longing is that, ‘The earth shall be filled with the glory of the God as the waters cover the sea,’ and the cry is the Advent cry of How long, O Lord, how long?

And it’s because of this configuration that God always appears to be an underachiever, because the advance payment never seems to be adequate. We never seem to get enough heaven on earth to reassure us that the full dose is coming later. To return to Woody Allen’s way of putting the matter, ‘If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank.’ We get into the habit of constantly deferring the expectation of God’s fulfilling our earthly needs, let alone desires. And this habit gradually transposes from wondering why God won’t fully

¹ Woody Allen, Love and Death (USA: MGM 1975).
reveal the final glory to assuming God can’t. Thus my assertion that the conventional story of God inevitably ends up adopting Woody Allen’s judgement and regarding God as an underachiever.

Notice a continuous thread of liberation in this story. God liberates Israel from Egypt. God continually delivers Israel from its hostile neighbours. God largely, if partially, liberates Israel from Babylon. And finally, fundamentally, Christ liberates us all from sin and death. What this means is that, if we ever feel constrained, by sin, suffering, pain or persecution, there’s always likely to be a sense that God’s not kept the divine side of the bargain. If liberation is what faith is all about, then we’ll always be looking for more. Because we never truly feel free.

So let’s see what it might be like to tell the story of God a slightly different way. God’s whole life is shaped to be in relationship. The Trinity is utter relationship – Father, Son and Spirit are boundlessly open and available to one another, utterly attending and present to one another, constantly responding and understanding and listening and reflecting, like a dance partner, a keepy-uppy football training partner, and a counsellor all rolled into one. God is constantly looking to expand this circle of relationship, this utter presence and attention and delight and partnership. Israel is the name we give to the people through whom God sought to extend this relationship to all creation.

But here’s where it gets interesting. Like all relationships, the love between God and Israel has two dangers. Either Israel becomes too independent, and sees God as an appendage it can cast off and God’s action as an instrument it can use or neglect at will. Or Israel becomes too dependent, and is so needy that it never finds abundant life because it’s constantly lurching from one crisis to the next. How does God address this problem? What we see is a thread that runs through the Old Testament by which God is made known to people in situations of adversity. God doesn’t show up simply as the rescuer. It’s as if people in the most daunting moments in their lives become aware that God’s purpose was not to fix the world or to fix them, but to be with them and share life with them at least as much if not more in adversity than in times of plenty.

Consider Hagar, the slave girl Abraham ill-used. She laments her situation, facing the death of her son Ishmael. But, says Genesis, ‘God was with the boy.’ Consider Jacob, the ne’er do well who ran away from conflict with his brother Esau. God wrestled with Jacob all night and portrayed the God who, in doubt and sorrow and wilderness and wandering, will never let us go. Consider Elijah, who ran away so much that God continually asked, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’, but who finally met God not in the fire, or the earthquake, but in the sound of an echoing silence. Consider Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who weren’t saved from Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace but found in the midst of the fire that there was one with them who looked like God.

Consider two things about these stories. Notice first that they portray in different ways the experience of Israel in exile in Babylon. God hadn’t rescued them: yet they felt closer to God at what was assumed to be the lowest moment in Israel’s history than they’d ever felt during the times of plenty in the Promised Land. That’s the discovery on which the whole Bible rests. And notice second that this time in exile was the period when the Bible was written. The story of the Old Testament is precisely this: that Israel had always assumed that God was the liberator, and that the covenant made at Sinai was a guarantee that God would continue to liberate Israel forever and a day as long as was necessary. But in exile in Babylon Israel was learning that God isn’t a device, like a get out of jail card in a Monopoly game; God is longing to be in relationship with us. The covenant isn’t a contract that we wave in God’s face when we feel let down: it’s a token of the entire purpose of God to be with us in good times and bad.

This means the coming of Jesus isn’t the final, grandest rescue act of them all. It’s the utter manifestation of God’s commitment to be with us, come what may. Eternal life without God is useless to us: it’s no more than a perpetual prison. God’s offering us something much richer, much
deeper, much more challenging and wonderful: everlasting relationship, a relationship that holds through adversity, danger, disaster, and death. As soon as we ask the question, ‘Do I get eternal life out of this?’, it’s proof positive that we want something else more than we want the relationship.

When I was a child I used to go every month or two and see an elderly woman who lived a 20-minute walk from my house. Often after I’d been there a half-hour my elderly friend would go to the drawer near the window and get out some chocolate and share it with me. One day I’d been there 45 minutes and I thought it was time to go. As I was leaving I looked over to the drawer. Her face fell. She loved it that I regularly came to visit. But in that moment she knew for certain that a big part of me was coming not of simply because being with her, but because I thought there might be chocolate.

Our faith in God is the same. We’re always looking for the candy; and if there’s not enough candy, or not frequent enough candy, we decry God as an underachiever. But for God it’s always about the covenant. It’s always about the relationship. The Christian faith doesn’t have a prescription for how God fixes our problems. It doesn’t have a simple formula for how and when healing happens or how and when eternal life follows death. Instead, Christians simply believe that the greatest power in the universe is God’s desire to be in relationship with us, a relationship we don’t earn so we call it joy, a relationship we can’t match so we call it love, a relationship that never ends so we call it glory, a relationship that costs God everything so we call it grace. And that desire and that relationship are stronger than the other forces in our lives – evil, sin, and death. To be a Christian means to be transformed by the discovery that God is with us in such a way that we stop noticing or counting what God does for us. It’s not about the for. It’s about the with.

That’s the revelation Israel received in exile. That’s the foundation of the whole Bible. That’s where joy lies. And that’s our Advent hope: that God may act for us and draw down the capital of eternity into the current of our present crisis; but more importantly, that until this whole story is over, whatever our distress, whatever our wilderness, whatever our adversity, God is utterly with us, is shaped to be with us now and forever, and that in God, we shall never, ever, ever be alone.