

This is a tale of two dogs. One young, one slightly older. One big, one slightly smaller. One red, one multicolored. One not the sharpest of puppies, one far too smart for her own good. Both very good dogs. Both very sweet dogs. Both spoiled rotten and beloved. And yet, they are startlingly different. Yes, this is the tale of Riley and Scully.

You all know Scully. Scully is our precious, spoiled rotten, Zoom bomber of a dog, who is obsessed with Starbucks, naps, and any food that is the color orange, but honestly any food will do, as long as it isn't green. Essentially, I have raised a dog who is me in four legged form. Unfortunately, Scully also seems to have inherited another trait from me. She's not the most zen of dogs. Scully has an absolute streak of anxiety and worry in her, that I do fear she has picked up from me. She is not a dog to sit still and quietly observe the world. She's constantly distracted, constantly hunting, constantly making sure that she's not missing out on anything. You can jar this dog out of a deep sleep simply by opening up a bag of cheese. She has to inspect every single thing that comes into the house. She has to know exactly what you are doing at all times. She is constantly under foot and on your lap and rarely does she like being left alone. She's hyper and a smidge hypersensitive. You step on this dog's paw and she will whimper and limp to beat the band because she knows

she'll get more snacks that way. You cannot get anything by Scully, it's just not how she operates. She has to know at all times the what, when, how, and why of the world or she isn't settled.

And then there's Riley. Riley is my in-laws, 80 pound, Irish Setter puppy. He's three and is very, very much a puppy, puppy. He's all gangly legs and scarfing down food. And literally as I wrote that sentence he came up and shoved his smuzzle in my face to say hi. But here's the thing...for as much as Riley is adorable...he's a bit...dull. This dog *bites* his water. He doesn't drink it, he bites it. You look at him and you can tell there isn't a whole lot going on in his little puppy brain besides like the thought of food and when his next round of scratches is going to be. From the moment I met this dog, it was like, well, he's so very cute, and that may be all we can ask of him. But here's the other thing about Riley. He's completely chilled out. For as much as he has the hyper puppy thing down, he's also just totally content to come along for the ride. He doesn't get riled up or nervous. He just wanders around the house, like oh hi guys, what are we doing now. The world does not bother Riley whatsoever. He is in so many ways, the polar opposite of my dear, darling, high strung Scully.

Because that's the thing, Scully is smart, but the world bothers her immensely. She can't chill out, she can rarely calm down. It's like she just

has to know what's going on and if she doesn't then she doesn't know what to do with herself. Riley has no nerves, Scully is all about her nerves when she wants to be. Riley is perfectly content to observe the world around him, but not let it get in his way of being happy and content. Scully observes the world like crazy, and is constantly on her guard for the next thing that is going to bug her, get her hackles up, and drive her bonkers. Somehow in this tale of two puppies, we have also found a tale of two reactions to the season of Advent, a tale of two approaches to the world.

The gospel for this week probably doesn't sound all that different from last week's. Jesus is with the disciples once again telling them what the second coming will look like. He gives them terrifying, nerve-wracking words about signs in the stars and the seas roaring. He says the very heavens themselves will be shaken, and he tells them that there will be plenty going on in the world that they will absolutely know what's going on around them, because it will be hard to miss. He tells them in no uncertain terms that they will know when the kingdom of God is near. And hearing that you kind of think that Scully has the right approach to the world. Constant vigilance. A constant zooming around, nose to the ground, making sure that you don't miss a thing, because when *the thing* happens, you want to be able to know what, when, how, and why it's going down. Scully

would be like, “Jesus, I got this. I will stand guard. I will BE READY when the world ends. Don’t you worry. Guard dog reporting for duty.”

But then Jesus kind of changes tact a bit. I mean he definitely hits the Advent, keep awake, keep alert vibe, but he also tells the disciples that they need to be on their guard against something else a bit more pervasive than roaring seas and sprouting fig trees. Jesus tells them that they need to be on their guard against...worry. He tells them to be on guard so that their hearts might not be weighed down by the worries of this life, because if they are, then they won’t be paying attention to the right things, they won’t be keeping alert towards the right things, they will be so distracted by everything else that they will miss the point of what might be standing right in front of them. Suddenly, hearing that shift, you realize that at the end of the day, Riley might be the one with this whole Advent thing down pat. A calm, casual awareness of the world without the nagging stress of it. A worldview that says, I know what’s going on out the window but I’m not *freaking out* about it either, because it’s just there, going on about its business. Riley would be like, “Jesus, I got this. We’re going to focus on the right things. I’m gonna be right here, hanging out, observing, meditating, and I’ll let you know if things go haywire.”

In this gospel, in these two dogs, we have a stark lesson about how we not only approach Advent, but how we approach our lives, and I will say, I feel immensely called out by it, because as I said, I have raised my dog to be like me. I will whole-heartedly own that hearing Jesus tell us to not be weighed down by the worries of the world makes me inwardly cringe, because I want to be like, “Jesus, of all the things you ask of me, can we please, for the love of all that is holy, skip that one, please?!” Because, well, worry is just *what I do*. I am a master at it. I am the epitome of the cliché, I will worry if I don’t have something to worry about. And honestly, I know it’s not great, I know it causes stress, and I know it tends to lead to a little bit of a glass half empty view of the world, and so Jesus asking me to let go of that kind of worry makes me want to throw up my hands and say please ask of me anything else but that!

I mean, look at the world around us, there is PLENTY to worry about! Over the last two weeks, our country has seen multiple trials some of which have spoken towards our indifference towards social justice, and others of which have lifted up once again the pain of those lives taken for no other reason than they were of a different color. Covid continues to rage, the vaccine debate continues on. Gas prices are astronomical. Supply chain issues have us anxious about shipping for our Christmas presents. Work

schedules are still so hectic that everyone feels perpetually stressed out, and then you throw on top of that the fact that it's almost Christmas which means, shopping, Christmas cards, wrapping presents, traveling, planning, cooking, decorating, and every other thing we need to do and we want to be like, "Umm, Jesus, we'll get to that no worrying about the weight of the world in the new year. It'll be our New Year's resolution, because right now I need to keep my worry close at hand."

But I think that's just the point Jesus is getting at. So, so, so many of those things are not things we need to be worrying about, stressing out about, placing all of our focus on. If we put half as much worry and energy into issues of justice, poverty, and love in this world, then we might be able to actually bring the kingdom of heaven to earth, but instead we spend all of our time triple checking our UPS tracking in case that one thing doesn't get here on time and if it doesn't then CHRISTMAS IS RUINED! We could probably worry until the cows come home about what Christmas will look like this year in our faith communities, will we have enough flowers, will people come back, will we sing the right songs, instead of letting our hearts wonder and worry about whether or not we are truly prepared for the deep incarnational presence of the Word of God made flesh who will call us to deep love, deep forgiveness, deep holiness, deep hope, deep grace.

I think we all have the concept of Advent down pat. Keep awake, keep alert. But I think the question we sometimes miss is whether or not we're awake and alert towards the right things? Are you being weighed down by the worries of the world, or are you being buoyed by the hope of the promise that Christ is quickly coming and he will change our hearts, our minds, the very center of the entire universe? We should be on guard, but more than anything we should be on guard that we don't let this world distract us from really and truly matters. At some point, each of us during the next couple of weeks is going to feel we're too busy for this faith thing, and we'll get around to it when the rest of our to do list is done and that is the moment when we are going to realize that we have taken the Scully approach to the world, and we need to ask ourselves where our center, where our focus truly is.

Don't get me wrong, I need Scully to bark her head off if someone weird is at our front door. That's a good kind of alertness. I don't need her "get off my lawn" to a bunch of deer who are just minding their own business. That is a worry of the world. So, my dear beloveds may this Advent season encourage you to a Riley way of seeing the world. Take a look around you, appreciate what you see, love those you are with, and take a deep breath. Let the worry wait, for Christ is quickly coming. **AMEN!!!**