

“God’s Hotel” is Dr. Victoria Sweet’s memoir of caring for patients at San Francisco’s Lagunda Honda Hospital, the last “almshouse” hospital of its kind in the country, a facility serving the city’s poorest and most destitute.

Dr. Sweet writes about one of her colleagues, Dr. Curtis, who cared for stroke patients. One day during rounds, Dr. Curtis saw that a patient who had been ready for discharge months before was still at the hospital, still in a wheelchair, still in therapy. Dr. Curtis asked why the patient, who was able to walk, was still in a wheelchair. “No shoes, Doc,” the man said. “They ordered me special shoes but they’re waiting for Medicaid to approve them.” “How long have they been waiting?” Dr. Curtis asked. “Three months.” The Doctor thought a moment. “What size shoe do you wear?” “Size nine.” Then Dr. Curtis, despite the rounds he still had to finish and the charts he had to dictate, left the ward, got in his car, and drove to Walmart, where he bought a pair of size nine running shoes. He returned to the Hospital, put the shoes on the patient’s feet and wrote the discharge orders. Dr. Sweet ran into Dr. Curtis as he returned with the shoes which left Dr. Sweet wondering: Why had Dr. Curtis done this? And why hadn’t anyone else? She writes: “It was a simple thing to do, but it never would have occurred to me to do it. I would have been frustrated with the shoe delay and would have filled out a second or even a third Medicaid request. I might have even braved its phone tree to complain about the amount of time the pair of shoes was taking. But it would have never occurred to me to go to Walmart and buy the patient’s shoes. I had too much to do, too many forms to fill out, too many other patients to see and yet Dr. Curtis got in his car without much questioning and hurried back to the ward with the shoes to put them on the patient himself. He reminded me of an aphorism: “The secret in the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.”

John the Baptist uses images: level the mountains, fill in the valleys, straighten the curves, literally, change the world, make it new. And there is something about a challenge that great, with rewards that great, that is very attractive to most people. In response to the prophet’s challenge, if we seek a great cause, we need look no further than our own daily lives and the thousand and one small challenges that face each one of us everyday. It is by meeting these, over and over again, with patience, with justice, and with love that we make ready the way of the Lord. Whatever it may be that makes up our lives, in our families, schools, jobs, parish, community- in all of it- there is greatness for us if we live it gracefully.

The goal of changing the world is a real one. The adventurous and challenging imagery used in the Gospel is not deceptive. It pictures a real world, and that must be remembered, because without it life can be robbed of its purpose. Life can cease to be an Advent, and the way of the Lord gets closed down. Our Advent lives are a mixture, a mixture of a vision for the future and a determination to make the present the best, the most graceful it can be.