

The First Sunday of Advent
Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

December 2nd, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

An Unexpected Advent
The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

For at least the first couple of generations of Christians, the coming of the Son of Man was considered imminent – what C. S. Lewis once referred to as the rolling up of the universe, a world completely undone – perhaps even in a radical upheaval – and recast anew. Many of our sisters and brothers, and many of us, still have a hope for a return of God like this. We’ve all heard of *The Left Behind Series* even if we haven’t read it. We all know the ink spilled on the great apocalyptic books of our holy writ, even though we laugh sometimes at the ludicrous suggestions that this or that historical or contemporary event was predicted by a virtually unknown figure buried by two millennia of history.

We are hardwired it seems for the cosmic crunch, the unraveling of reality. We suffer anxiety about it. It gives us bad dreams. Hollywood makes a killing painting it up on the big screen for us. And then just think of all the ways we protect ourselves: the life insurance, the health insurance, the car insurance, the home insurance, the hedge funds, the security systems, the relentless scramble for safety. As nations, we build walls, fund check points, and raise up standing armies. In recent history, we practically bankrupted ourselves threatening Armageddon against Armageddon with nuclear arsenals. Our ancient ancestors reminisced about great floods and looked to the heavens with dread. Our most cutting edge scientists quarrel and opine over mass extinction events, the cosmic accidents of great rocks falling from the sky, or the terrible threat of global warming.

I’ll repeat what I said a couple of weeks ago: We are children of the apocalypse. If you think very long you’ll notice that so many things we have come to take for granted were only built, engineered, or re-worked on the heels of the last Great War that permanently altered the course of the human family. Who is to say something won’t happen tomorrow that will make us start all over again?

Jesus says to us in today’s Gospel yet again that such events are inevitable. They are as inexorable as the march of time itself. “Keep awake, therefore. . .” Advent opens with us spooked yet again by God in Christ who reminds us in the midst of all the beauty we see around us. . . who reminds us that we are vulnerable.

Yet it is this time of year that we turn to stacks of Christmas cards, carefully planned calendars, travel itineraries, or our own familiar wintry obsessions, and try to build towards Christmas. We anticipate the day when Jesus comes into our lives. We even have it scheduled on the calendar! We sing lessons and carols looking forward to it. We get the children ready and wrap the presents. We plan as though we haven’t been planning all year. And we suffer the stresses of the shopping season; try to make our year-end fortunes or just the reverse by maxing out the credit cards!

Are we not a goofy lot?

It has often been the custom of Christians to hear today's Gospel as a passage warning about unexpected death, a certain reality for the first century, and still a reality twenty centuries in our own time even with all that contemporary medicine has to offer. Death, metaphorical or literal, is like that "thief in the night," striking us in all our vulnerability. . . vulnerability around which we can never set a fence high enough or a place a guard strong enough. Death holds the fullness of Jesus' teaching and way of life, to be sure, because it is so final and indubitably transformative – an opportunity for foundational change and even new life whether it comes upon the good, bad, or the indifferent.

But what I would like to suggest to you today is that the unexpected coming of the Son of Man also captures how God's grace comes to us in every other way. Yes, grace: that unexpected visitor who comes like a thief in the night and upsets the apple-cart. That annoying stranger or unplanned event that unravels our carefully laid Advent plans, throws a monkey wrench into the holiday calendar, hooks us away from the sea of Christmas cards, the shopping, the traffic, the decorating, the scrambling from one desperate obsession to the next. We are like the women grinding the grain when one is taken away. Who is more surprised? The one who remains or the one who is suddenly snatched elsewhere? Both must be, surely. The daily routine is suddenly broken into. Life is suddenly revealed in all of its raw unpredictability. It is an opportunity to see the world renewed right before our eyes.

This is who our God is, for all our attempts to tame the Divine. For all our attempts to explain the universe in rational, scientific, and often – even for us as Christians – Godless terms. Yet God still comes back at us with surprises. It may be as simple as a smile on a child's face, a ray of sunshine, or inspiration during a walk. It may be as radical as changing a job, the loss of the loved one, or the reconfiguring of an entire community.

The Second Coming, the coming of the Son of Man is forever imminent, it seems. It is a fact of life, in fact there is no life without it. We constantly sit at the edge of God's grace, much like sitting at the edge of the ocean, or the top of a roller coaster. We remain awake or nod off awaiting the return of our Maker who is coming to re-make us, our households, our relationships, to meddle with the very woof and warp of our lives. . . and give us the real treasure, which is the recognition that life does not belong to us but forever to Another.

And in that is a strange hope. A hope for us during Advent when we mostly run the risk of being consumed by our preparations – so consumed that we lose sight of why we're doing all the running around, suffering the impatience of our own voracious appetites or those of others, or simply scrambling to keep up. God is going to break into the midst of it in unexpected ways. We may not welcome it. We frequently might not even notice. But grace will still break through, turn things over in subtle and sometimes radical ways. Make a mess of our best laid plans, and then depart again like a thief, leaving us breathless, surprised, bewildered, but undeniably grounded again in reality. . .

A reality in which God is continually remaking the People of the Spirit, working hearts of stone back into flesh, beating our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks. No matter what happens, no matter how unexpected, God's grace is intending to re-create us, make us anew, and call us back to walk in the "light of the Lord," our perpetual journey of transformation.