

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent
RCL Lectionary, Year C
Jeremiah 33:14-16 / Psalm 25:1-9 / 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 / Luke 21:25-36
November 29th, 2009

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

The Grace of Advent
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

On our annual Thanksgiving trip to Monterey this weekend, we decided to eat a bit off the beaten track. One of our stops included a Persian restaurant on Friday evening. So we called in our reservation, and showed up good and early. Much to our surprise when we arrived, this restaurant, along with other Middle-Eastern establishments along the Central California Coast, features belly dancing on Friday evenings. So it was my wife who turned to me with a laugh as the meal arrived, noting that she never imagined saying grace with her family over dinner in front of a live belly-dancer!

Maybe that's a lesson for Advent, which begins today with the new Church year: expect the unimaginable...

That same evening, as we walked down to Cannery Row, past all the decked-out shops and Christmas revelers and the carolers on Steinbeck Square, we encountered the crowds and shopkeepers possessed by both the hopes and desperation of Black Friday – made ever more prescient by the doubts and concerns of the economic times. There was, of course, the long line of families with children ready to talk to Santa. There was the choral group singing carols in four-part harmony, decked out in Northern European garb, ready for the ice and snow that comes so rarely to Monterey or Northern California. But the cold wind off the ocean was icy enough, bone-biting, to demand a bit of the Christmas spirit of us even when Advent hadn't yet officially begun.

But our son, Daniel, wasn't all that interested in the hype. He was drawn instead by the incessant roar of the waves below against the rocks and the patchy sand. So we found our way around the media vans and the pressing crowds and joined the handful of people on the beach, taking in the salty waves in the moonlight – those waves that had pounded the seashore of Monterey before the first Christmas carols were sung anywhere, even before the first Christmas – the surf and foam that touched on eternity. It reminded me of the opening of the gospel today – Jesus pointing to the lifeblood of the earth and signs in the sky as a witness to God's grace, working away at the shores of our souls day-in and day-out, remaking the landscapes of our lives and hearts without ceasing, without pausing for breath, in some profound way for all of time.

Anglican theologian Michael Schut asks: "Where, would you say, does God live? In heaven? On earth? Within us? All around us? When you pray, where do you imagine God?"

“Western theology,” he continues, “has, generally speaking, emphasized God’s transcendence, separate from and above creation.”*

Put another way, we have inherited a very paltry understanding of our God with us, at best, a sort of “God of the gaps,” who seems only present to us in the inexplicable, a God who is only visible where empirical evidence fails us or scientific explanation falls short. But really, this God is no good to me. Because a God like this gets increasingly pushed out the more I know about how the cosmos works – or at least how it appears to work through human eyes and reasoning.

But I need a God, who, according to the prophet Amos, “made the Pleiades and Orion,” who set the universe not only in motion, but abides in the very laws that govern it, who rests in every particle and in the fabric of the cosmos – who not only surprises me moment-to-moment, but meets me, as Christ says, in the signs of the sun and the moon and the stars, and the roaring of the seas and the waves. A God in Christ, too, who speaks to me through the winds and through the voices of my brothers and sisters, through my loved ones, through the music and the ringing silences. This is an imminent God, the God who is “our righteousness” in the words of Jeremiah this day. This, in short, is the God of Advent.

Jeremiah was writing of hope to a people struggling with God’s purpose for them as they lived in exile. Likewise, Paul, in some of the earliest Christian writing we have only a generation after Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, writes to his sisters and brothers in Christ in Thessalonica. They were struggling, too, with God’s purpose, as their faith needed to be more than just a belief system to see them through the “chances and changes” of this life. It needed what we might call “legs,” a sense of the imminence of God, the closeness of Christ’s coming among them – the sort of promised presence that changes lives in radical and, yes, unpredictable ways.

The promise of Advent is that we are likely to get precisely this kind of God in “Emmanuel,” literally, “God with us,” not the God of the gaps or the God who occupies a throne in some other-worldly dimension, nor a pie-in-the-sky, afterlife-only God. But a God who is so present, so corporeal, so part of our hearts and bones that we cannot go anywhere beyond the divine touch, that we are bound in every single direction by the grace of the One who understands us more than we will ever be able to understand ourselves.

Advent is a hopeful time, because the impending apocalyptic images of our readings this time of year are not meant so much to engender fear, but a promise that every calamity and upset that touches the mundane aspects of our lives presents yet another opportunity to see the veil pulled back; the thin walls of our consciousness, knowledge, and control broken through by God’s impending reign.

And with that break through, we are re-made, again and again, in a rhythm as ancient as the waves at the sea-shore, by a grace that can never leave us alone; a grace that promises to send a Child into the very depths of our hearts and lives; and even in deepest death, holds us with a yet deeper love that abides forever.

* From “Coming Home: Economics and Ecology” by Michael Schut, in *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 4 (Fall 2009).