

Sermon Notes

The First Sunday of Advent

Year A

November 28th, 2010

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley, California

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A Thief in the Night

I had a rather strange e-mail encounter this past week with a self-styled prophet from Australia who had spent a good deal of time assembling a series of YouTube videos about his research on labyrinths. It looked at first glance like good stuff – the kind of stuff we'd like to have available for our increasingly internet savvy and mobile seeker looking for a Christian community to join.

Sadly, it turned out to be a diatribe against labyrinths-in-general, a series of logical leaps and frequent quotes from – you might have guessed it – the Book of Revelation. All to ultimately justify how labyrinths were not just pagan, but were evil and death-dealing. It was sort of a spiritual equivalent of a famous *Seinfeld* episode: “**No labyrinths for you!**” I wrote back and asked the author to take us off his e-mail lists. I couldn't stomach unsolicited counsel from a stranger undermining the beautiful gift of our children gathered around the labyrinth – as they do even this day – praising God with music and praying as Christ taught us. . . or the occasional pilgrim who comes during the week to walk our labyrinth, searching for God's heart.

In the wee hours of the morning, probably due to the time difference of our two continents, I received a not-so-unusual response: that I was flouting “God's Word.” That made an effective end to the argument. But I had to point out that Christians have a long history of turning “pagan” and even profane symbols sacred. The cross itself is testament to an imperial symbol of shame and execution made into a central symbol of holiness and transformation. Behind me is our Advent wreath, derived from an obscure Northern European indigenous religious tradition looking for the coming of light. Now it stands for the renewal of the Church Year and the hoped for coming of the Light of Christ. Some of you have probably already put up your Christmas Tree – originally probably a symbol from another Northern European tribal tradition and now an amalgam of secular, sacred, ancient, and contemporary beliefs and priorities. Our worship space is roughly based on the Roman basilica, a governmental building meant to reflect the authority of Empire. Even my garments have connections with pre-Christian fashion. We Christians are an odd and somewhat rude lot. We make others' symbols our own. The labyrinth, after all, no longer has a Minotaur at its center (as it did according to Greek myth), but an empty place for the pilgrim and God to meet.

Was an unexpected missive from an 21st-century iconoclastic “prophet” meant to be what Jesus calls a “thief in the night” for me this week? Perhaps. But, as always, not in the way our brother nor I quite expected. His challenge to one of our spiritual symbols here at Church of Our Saviour was rather an unexpected gift of grace, for it opened my eyes to the rich symbolism of Advent, and the way in which it re-organizes not just our living rooms, sanctuaries, and secular lives this time of year, but the way it has, across the centuries, remade the tribal customs of our ancestors, co-opted old traditions and made them anew, and left us breathless with surprise.

Jesus has thieves-in-the-night in today’s Gospel, but they are not just here to rob us blind. They are also here, in the words of Isaiah, to beat our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruning hooks. The in-breaking of Advent, the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, is meant to completely remake our world, from the symbols we use to our tools, to the very homes, relationships, communities, and hearts we inhabit. These thieves can steal us of our complacency, rob us of the way we thought things were, take away our comfortable notions of the way things should be, and replace them all with a new vision, a new reality – God’s vision, even, of a world completely remade.

So keep awake in this new Church Year. Keep awake for the unexpected and the unusual, for the thieves of grace. God’s grace is out to surprise each of us in ways and at times we have not yet imagined.

In his parting shot, the Australian anti-labyrinth “prophet” wrote me with what he perceived to be the “voice of God,” and that voice said I was leading God’s flock astray. I wrote back to him that I believed he was vastly overstating my importance. I am, after all, on this journey with you. I hold a place, I hope, for God’s grace to be revealed. I am called to offer some stability, care, and witness to a prayerful life that makes room for a bit of alertness to God at work, to point out the in-breaking of God’s reign. But in the end, it isn’t about me. It’s about God and all of you.

Still, his frontal assault on one of our spiritual symbols threw light on Advent and God’s grace in a whole new way this week. I’m tempted to write back and thank him for being a “thief in the night” for me.

Maybe I should!