

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
NOVEMBER 29, 2015
1ST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
PASTOR SARAH MILLER
SERMON: WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT IT

Scripture readings: Jeremiah 33:14-16 Psalm 25 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 Luke 21:25-36

I arrived at the maternity ward a few hours after the baby was born. When I walked into the room her parents were sitting there beaming at their newborn daughter. She was their first child, and they were glowing! They let me hold her. I think they knew that was why I had come.

When I left the hospital I thought about the months that those two parents had spent waiting and hoping. They had shown me the sunny little upstairs room that had been set aside for her months before her arrival. I knew some of the things that her mother had done to get ready for her. There had been regular checkups with the doctor. There were classes and exercises and vitamins. Both parents had read books on child care so they'd know what to expect.

They had gotten a crib and a car seat, diapers and blankets, nightgowns and little undershirts, baby powder and special soap. Everything was in place when their daughter was born. They were ready. They were prepared. So they thought!

But in spite of all of their preparations, in spite of everything they had done in anticipation of the birth of that baby, they still weren't really ready. Nothing had prepared them for the mystery of birth, for the sheer miracle of a new life. As they cradled that fragile little body in their arms, they realized for the first time that in countless unpredictable ways their lives would never be the same again.

On this first day of Advent we, too, are getting ready for a baby. We, too, will make special preparations. We'll haul out the boxes of ornaments and carefully unwrap each one. Some of them will bring back memories of other Christmases. They will remind us of who we are and where we've been.

We'll buy some gifts for people we love. We may even *make* a few special presents, gifts constructed of wood or fabric or yarn. We'll send some cards. We may hang some mistletoe. We'll put candles in the windows. And then we'll start thinking about food. Some of us will shuffle through our recipe boxes and pull out a few special cards, stained and spotted from years of use. We'll stir up magical mixtures of cinnamon and nuts and nostalgia.

There will be special services here at church with wonderful music, candlelight, and familiar readings from the Bible.

Yet even with all of our preparations, we are never quite ready for the unpredictable

impact of Christmas. We are never fully prepared for God's remarkable entry into human life. We stand in awe of the fact that the Creator of the universe took on the limitations of flesh and blood in order to show us how much we are loved and in order to show us how to love each other.

Our gospel reading for today points toward the Second Coming, the time when Jesus will come back to the earth in victory. Luke warns us that the Lord's return will be preceded by a series of strange and unsettling things: signs in the sky, conflict among the nations, turbulence in the oceans. When the time is right Jesus will descend from the sky in the middle of a great cloud. Luke urges us to be ready at every moment for the Lord to physically appear in our midst. The early Christians expected Jesus to come back to earth in their own lifetime. There must have been a great sense of disillusionment when it didn't happen the way they expected it to.

But there's another way of looking at the return of Jesus to the earth. We don't have to wait for some cataclysmic Second Coming. The spirit of Jesus breaks in on us daily in quiet ways, claiming us, calling us, reminding us that we belong to God. When we least expect it, he is there.

A number of years ago I came across a poem about a woman who was shopping in a dime store. When she stopped at a display of costume jewelry, something caught her eye.

Christ in Woolworths

*I did not think to find You there -
Crucifixes, large and small,
Sixpence and threepence, on a tray,
Among the artificial pearls,
Paste rings, tin watches, beads of glass.
It seemed so strange to find You there
Fingered by people coarse and crass,
Who had no reverence at all.
Yet - what is it that You would say?
"For these I hang upon My cross,
For these the agony and loss,
Though heedlessly they pass Me by."
Dear Lord, forgive such fools as I,
Who thought it strange to find You there,
When You are with us everywhere.*

Teresa Hooley

God comes to us in unpredictable ways, in the unexpected moment, in the unlikely setting. We've become so familiar with the story of Jesus' life that we sometimes fail to notice how utterly amazing it is. There is one unlikely event after another.

Consider the setting in which he was born. You would think that such a special child would be laid in a hand-carved mahogany cradle and covered with embroidered silken blankets,

and yet for that infant Messiah there was not even a rough-hewn crib. He was placed in the most unlikely bed of all: a trough, a feed-box for animals!

When he grew to be a man, look at the people he chose to be his closest friends, the ones to whom he entrusted the future of his mission to the world. He didn't go to a governor or an emperor or to anyone who was wealthy, powerful or educated. He chose the most unlikely crew imaginable - fishermen, a tax collector, a woman who had a troubled past, ordinary people - and he left his work in their hands.

Consider the miracles that he performed. Surely a man with the power to work miracles could have caused a bigger stir if he had just been a little more flashy. He might have turned a sparrow into a peacock or a clay cup into a golden urn. That would have pleased the crowd and gotten some attention. But instead he used that special power to help people in need. He fed five thousand people who were hungry. He saved a bride and groom from embarrassment, keeping them from running out of wine at their wedding reception. He healed a man who had leprosy and one who was crippled and one who was blind. Instead of using his extraordinary power to bring attention to himself, he used it on behalf of people who needed help.

Look at the last week of his earthly life. He entered Jerusalem on a shaggy little donkey, not on a high-stepping stallion. What a strangely low-key entrance for a man who was called "the king of kings"! His final meal was certainly not what we would have expected. There was no testimonial dinner with speeches and extravagant gifts. The disciples weren't given leather-bound autographed copies of the Sermon on the Mount. Something very different happened. Jesus, their master and their Lord, got down on his knees and washed their tired, dusty feet. It was an act of humility, a final touching gesture of menial service. At the end of the meal he offered his friends bread and wine, signs of his own body and his own blood, the very essence of his life given to them in love.

Instead of being hailed as the Son of God, he was nailed to a cross. It appeared as if the whole enterprise had gone down in flames. But wait! There were still more surprises to come!

The resurrection! Surely then there could have been some dramatic, earth-shaking demonstration of majesty and power. And yet there was no dazzling appearance of the Risen Lord at the temple in downtown Jerusalem. There was no spectacular entrance with lightning in his eyes and thunder in his voice. Instead there was a quiet, reassuring presence with those who walked the lonely road to Emmaus. He came to a woman who wept in a cemetery garden. He appeared to his disciples at sunrise on a quiet beach.

From the beginning to the end of his earthly life Jesus turned up in unlikely places, chose ordinary people, and did unpredictable things. And if part of Jesus' mission on earth was to show us what God is like, then there is good reason to believe that God is still operating that way. God is not confined to church buildings. God's Spirit is loose in the universe. God is on the peak of the highest mountain and in the deepest part of the ocean and beyond the farthest star in the most distant galaxy. And God is present in some much less likely places as well: at the bedside of a cancer patient in a hospice unit, in a bus station in downtown Scranton, in a lonely hotel room in New York City, in the midst of a pile of rubble in Afghanistan, in a graveyard in

South Africa, in a refugee camp in Syria.

God is in our midst no matter where we are, no matter what we are doing. There is no spot where God is not. God is ready to take us by surprise and to fill us with joy when we least expect it. We know not the day or the hour, but we want to be open to receive it when it happens. It may come on Christmas Eve as we sit alone late at night in the dim glow of colored lights on a tree. It may come sometime next week as we stand in line in a crowded store and our ears pick up the sound of a recorded Christmas carol. It may come tomorrow or even this morning. God is breaking in upon us even now, bringing forgiveness for those of us who have been pinned down under the weight of some secret sin, bringing comfort for those of us who have known too many tears and too much pain, bringing peace for those of us who have lived too long with tension and fear.

God comes to us in the birth of a baby and fills us with joy and power and new life.
Come, Lord Jesus! Come!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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