

Advent 1B: **AWAKENING OF HOPE** – A Sermon by Dan Stern
November 30, 2008; Isaiah 64:1-9 & Mark 13:28-37

Though our souls sing as much on this day as on any and though commercial retailers push us to do so as early as possible according to the Christian calendar, it's still too early to be singing all our favorite Christmas carols. Before we get to see all the bright and celebrative Christmas reds, whites, golds, and greens, the primary liturgical color is blue. Blue is a traditional color of penitential soul-searching, preparatory fasting, and middle-of-night hushed expectancy. Blue is a dark sky color for a wet, wintry season. To be blue often means to be sad, and when we are sad during or approaching the holidays, we should know that it is not unusual or abnormal. It is, in fact, sort of right that it be so. Advent is a season of darkness, after all – looking toward the light, yes, but dark nonetheless. We light candles in the darkness, and, as much as possible, we stay awake. Gradually, we welcome more light, letting brighter reds & golds spread out across our deep blue.

Let us now, in our Union Prayer of Confession, be awakened to keep watch:

“O that You would tear open the heavens and come down!” (*pause dramatically rip paper at the mike*) The prophet Isaiah's cry is on behalf of everyone who yearns for God's powerful coming, God's cataclysmic reversal of all things unjust and staid and stuck. Come and 'rearrange the earth's very landscape' (*Seasons of the Spirit* commentary) for Your loving benevolent power is like the sky opening up...and the mountains trembling!!?? Yikes! Maybe Isaiah's thinking of something more than torn paper! Is he referring to flooding, earthquakes, volcanos here? We on the left coast of America find these poetic images of all-too-real cataclysmic possibilities a little too close for comfort. And as if we needed to spice up that imagery even more, Jesus, as he is remembered in Matthew 24 and Mark 13, speaks in multiple, mixed metaphors of the coming of the benevolent, loving God being like a thief coming in the night, and like a long suffering night of birth pangs.

This is supposed to be good news? How can we possibly look forward to God's coming reign if scripture pictures it coming like mountains trembling or like thieves breaking and entering?

However benevolent God's advent, Christ's returning is to be over the long haul, in the meantime, we could get hurt should the Cascade Mountains actually start trembling! Or scared out of our wits when that thief in the night traipses right in on us! And of course, these kinds of things can and do really happen. And it's always good news if and when we can make it through such catastrophes.

But lest we get overly and wrongly distracted by scary metaphors, please keep a couple things in mind: When the prophet Isaiah spoke of God's 'awesome unexpected deeds', he didn't have the end of the world in mind. Not at all. His primary emphasis wasn't destruction of any kind. Rather, he was poetically emphasizing this-worldly justice-making reversals of fortune, in which the privileged elite have a fall, and the downcast outsiders get raised up. Some of us are hoping that's what is starting to happen in earnest in our own beloved country right now, as a new New Deal administration takes its turn in office. A longtime ago in this country, people disparaged FDR as a socialist. They're doing the same right now with Barack. If rather moderate good sense

plans now being discussed suggest socialism, then Franklin Delanor Roosevelt must have been a very radical socialist indeed, and since the redistribution of goods is, very much an emphasis in Jesus' life and ministry, Jesus must have been a full-blown commie. Like Robin Hood, the robber God of Jesus' parables does take from the rich and give to the poor. And yes, that is and has always been a scary thing to some who find it's precisely why a list of people who call themselves Christians don't really emphasize Jesus' teaching much not tried and found wanting but found difficult and left untried. Yet the phrase most often repeated in the gospels is "Be not afraid!" Don't be afraid, but do be as ready as you can be in case a thief decides to call on you, or a nearby mountain starts to quake. It would be a ridiculously considerate thief who would let you know exactly when to be expecting him. And though earthquakes and volcanic eruptions can be anticipated seismically now to some degree, there's no guarantee of an adequate warning. If such metaphors suggest anything at all about God's nature, it might simply be this: that God is not boringly predictable! God is full of amazing surprises and reversals of fortune. So do be awake and stay watchful! But do not be afraid.

And just how, pray tell, are we to do this, to remain perpetually alert but not afraid? How can we even look forward to God's coming reign if scripture pictures it coming like mountains trembling or like thieves breaking and entering?

In order to stay attentive during the time we call Advent, John Shea says we need to learn to "entertain strangeness". "The proper attitude," says Shea, "Toward the strange and the scandalous during the season of Advent is this: Do not be afraid to take it into your home." Take in a pregnant teenager. Take in a foreign exchange student. Take in a homeless senior citizen, a troubled foster child, an illegal alien. Start where and with whom you feel able, but risk something this Advent. Entertain some kind of strangeness. Get comfortable with strangeness. And be not afraid in the process to start out on some great and grand adventure.

Notice please: the recommendation I just made about being adventurous is most appropriate now because Advent is the root word for advent-ure. An adventure, according to my *Webster's Compact Dictionary*, is "a strange or exciting experience, a risky enterprise". To have an adventure, one must be prepared to meet strange beasts, see unusual things. For a good Bible story adventure, try reading the entire Book of Revelation out loud, by candlelight, all in one sitting. Adventures may at first scare as much as they delight, but ultimately, they are the gateway to the new, and we need them in our lives. We need to cultivate a capacity for adventure and surprise. The season of Advent is tailor-made for just this. Advent, this time of adventure, was never meant to be a mere prelude to Christmas. It's much more than that.

Compare it, if you will, with a well-known kind of adventure you may or may not have ever experienced on this earth-preparing to give birth to a child. Parenting is, of course, a kind of adventure too – more like the time that comes after the birth of the Christ child, perhaps. But prior to parenting is the time of gestation, of expectation and preparation. This pregnant period has an integrity of its own.

One time in Chicago a Christian woman, already a loving mother of two, told me how much her own experience with both pregnancy and the birthing process had meant to her. And though she didn't consider it practical or appropriate to try to raise more than the two children she and her

husband already had, she thought that becoming a surrogate mother – gestating and lovingly delivering a child for others to raise – would be something she could do, something, in fact, that she'd delight in. Now most parents and would-be parents tell me that they could never imagine doing such a thing I'm told that many would-be surrogates change their minds, unable to bear giving up a child they bring into the world. And yet for this woman at least, pregnancy had its own rewards. It wasn't just a means to an end. Expectant times do have their own integrity.

Some of you who joined this church took your time about it too, you came and sat here for months and months, gestating, slowly soaking in the atmosphere, spiritually pregnant with the hope and grace you were discovering here. Theologians tell us we are all to be, as faithful Christian people, perpetually expectant. We are to stay watchful in the “now” for the “not yet”. Ever and always awake to the beauty and grace we believe will one day be realized in fullness.

Not a bad life attitude I'm sure it's not pleasant for a birth mom to endure morning sickness and birth pangs. I'm sure staying awake is not easy for her either, or for that matter, getting back to sleep when the kid inside is giving her repeated hard kicks in the stomach! Whether it has to do with a healthy pregnancy or the taking on of any appropriate life adventure, preparation is important. To prepare well for the future is to live as well as possible in the present, even when the pregnant moment is a kicking one that keeps you up at night.

And even though, perhaps precisely because our Advent/adventure mood is mostly blue, we can celebrate, in the present moment, the future moment unknown. Already one can hear a whisper, not yet a shout, of hushed expectancy. We hope for some kind of visitation, yes, but we're not yet even supposed to know exactly when, how, or even who it is that will be visiting us! What will be will be a real surprise! What will be will be just and fair. And what we need to do in the meantime is remain in but not of the present moment, awake to and unafraid of things strange, scandalous, surprising, and disruptive.

I like what William Thompson has to say about welcoming the strange and unknown, “We are all like flies crawling across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel,” says he. “We cannot see what angels and gods lie underneath the threshold of our perceptions.” None of us entirely sees or senses what creative genius lies underneath our feet or is happening right in front of us. It's better than we think. It's more than we think. More creative, more momentous, more beneficent.

One thing can be said about the benevolent loving thief coming in the night that Jesus may have been comparing to God. God brings amazingly good surprises. God calls us to be excitedly alive to adventure, willing to let the Spirit break through defensive posturings, anxious schemings, hard hearts, ready for something yet new until the very day we die. May our hearts be awakened to the hope that will see us through many great adventures, many challenging surprises, and right now, will see us beautifully and purposefully through this Advent adventure Season in the year of our Lord 2008. Amen.