

Aaron Miller – University Hill Congregation
Sunday, November 27, 2016

So, it's Advent--less than a month from Christmas! And, in case we might be inclined to forget that the Church is very weird by most standards, the lectionary greets us at the threshold of this beloved season with a gospel reading that--at least at first glance--is decidedly un-festive. Just about every store I've been in, in the past week, has been freshly decked in tinsel, with canned background music going on merrily about rosy cheeks and roasted chestnuts, while we've arrived today to hear about cleansing floods and the Saviour who shows up like a thief in the night. These are not images commonly associated with the spirit of the season. It's hard to imagine the Starbucks across the street from my house selling eggnog lattes with this stuff!

Nevertheless, as we ready ourselves to make the trek to Bethlehem once more, to join our voices again with angel choirs and dance with the shepherds, Jesus reminds us in no uncertain terms that what we're about to get into is not just nostalgia and cherished tradition. He reminds us here--at the beginning of a new Christian year--that he comes not as a charming custom, but as a massive disruption. Jesus reminds us that this season makes the world new. God's kingdom of hope, peace, joy and love comes not as a slight improvement over what we've managed to make for ourselves, but as something altogether, gloriously, unexpected.

As Christians, this season ought to bring us to the edge of our seats, eager and excited, not because we know what's coming, but because we don't. I mean, we have some idea--words like hope, peace, joy and love conjure up images and feelings, sometimes they even spur us to action; Scripture points us towards

realities that we can trust, even if we can't fully know. But at the end of the day this season reminds us that we are in cahoots with the God with who will not be tamed by our expectations, and praise God for it.

The images that Jesus tosses among us today are not easy ones, to be sure. They're not meant to be. And frankly, I don't think we need easy images when it comes to following Him. We need transforming ones, ones that expand our hearts and minds to receive the wild goodness of God and equip us to respond to Jesus' call to enter into that wild goodness with our whole selves; even to be beacons of it for this world that God so loves. When Jesus' words get inside of us, when *they* begin to shape our expectation, to transform our hope, then we'll be ready for the good news of great joy that is breaking, unexpectedly, into the world.

This season is training in expecting the unexpected God: the God who doesn't stick to the appropriate, godly-type places, but insists on being tangled up with us, with this world; the God who infuses this world with a life and a love that is beyond what we could hope or imagine. This seems to be something we have to learn and relearn and then learn again. We seem to have an astounding capacity to compartmentalize our lives and try to keep God in the right "God-drawer," to be pulled out when we're feeling holy or desperate or at some other appropriate time. We are well-trained by the world to know that it's ok to have a god that is nicely contained, whom we can have to do with if the mood strikes us, and who is not overly interested in the comings and goings of the rest of our lives.

But, mercifully, Jesus keeps insisting that that's not how things are.

Listen to the spaces that God shows up: in the midst of the everyday--eating and drinking, courting and marrying, in every manner of work--in the fields, the offices, the kitchens we spend our days in; even when we lock the doors at night,

we're not keeping ourselves away from God. As the psalmist cries out, "Wherever I go, there you are!" If we have it in our heads that God is satisfied to be our God for a few hours a week, that when we walk out of here we head back to our own time and space, of which God will be respectful, we're going to be in for a surprise. We deceive ourselves if we imagine that our work is somehow disconnected from God's world-renewing work; that our relationships and our tables are at a safe distance from the God who insists on being God with us, who calls us to this (Communion) table and to radical relationships in the world.

Of course, even when we accept this God-soaked reality, there are two basic ways that we can respond (besides trying to ignore the fact and carrying on in our own way). On the one hand, we can find ourselves overwhelmed by the reality of God's presence, fearful of judgment, anxious about our work, so that we become cramped and panicked, guarded and rigid. We can be worried that we aren't busy or ready or faithful enough for Jesus. We can hear Jesus' words as a threat that we'd better smarten up or we'll be wiped out, left behind, or deprived. But I don't think that way of hearing, that way of getting these images inside us, ever ends particularly well. It might have us doing some of the right things, but the motivation would be all wrong. Jesus wants us to respond to him in love, not fear. In any case, it's hard to twist anxiety into good news.

On the other hand we can hear--I dare say, we ought to hear--Jesus' words to us today as a serious invitation. When God acts, as God will, there is no doubt that that divine action is disruptive. It is even destructive, when necessary. "Whoever tries to save their life will lose it." There are things in our lives and in this world that need to end if we'll be faithful. "But," says Jesus, "whoever gives their life for my sake and for the sake of the kingdom will gain life, and life abundant." Jesus is not messing about when it comes to taking God seriously. But that seriousness

ought to bring about serious hope, serious peace, serious joy, serious love: life and life abundant! When Jesus turns our attention to the unexpectedness of God--the unexpectedness of grace, the unexpectedness of divine power and presence in the midst of even our workaday lives, in the all the details, in the breaking of bread and the pouring of wine, in the faith of a teenager, and the wonder of outcasts and shepherds--when Jesus turns our attention to our unexpected God, he does so in order to make us electric with anticipation, ready to grab hold of "life that is truly life," as St. Paul puts it.

The wonder of the incarnation we anticipate, the marvel of God With Us, God here and now, God living and active in this world, in these lives, transforms the way we understand everything. It wakes us up, gives us eyes to see this broken and beloved world as the stuff God is making new--beyond all expectation or reason, in ways we would never imagine. It makes us both patient *and* hopeful. Obviously today's gospel reading is not precisely a Christmassy kind of reading, but it reminds us that what God started in Jesus' birth--nothing short of the renewing of all things--is, even now, coming to fulfillment.

And Jesus' words today invite us into God's new-making work--not anxious or cramped by our task, but ready to run and jump and dance and sing the broad space of God's astounding grace, freed from everything that weighs us down. The underlying implication of Jesus' words is that although we can't tame God with our expectations and we can't even reduce God to our biggest hopes and dreams, we can be ready when God's restoring, redeeming grace comes flooding in, destroying sin and death. We can be ready to see when the kingdom arrives in the midst of the everyday, even in blisters and backaches. We can be ready for God's love to plunder our doubts and fears, our hurts and divisions, our self-destruction and our hardened hearts. Ready to say with Mary, "How can this be?" *and*, overshadowed

by the Holy Spirit, "Let it be with me, according to your word." Or, as Jesus will echo his mom years later: "Not my will, but yours be done."

We need a disruptive word to get us ready for this disruptive season. We need to be praying that God's grace would disrupt our lives. I dare you to do that this season. I really believe that the world needs the church to feel the full weight of Jesus' disruption. The gospel, when we have ears to hear, makes us dissatisfied with the way things are. We need to be ready in hope and risky in faith for something new. We're called, here and now, to live in eager anticipation of the full mystery of our faith--not that God will eventually swoop us out of here, but that finally heaven and earth will be one.

Our task is to live in the knowledge that, in spite of any evidence to the contrary, that reality is already taking shape--the Great Heist has already begun! Our task, following Jesus and alive to the Holy Spirit, overcome and overwhelmed by the flood of God's grace, is to get in on it: to live lives, wherever and whenever we find ourselves, in whatever we're doing, of disruptive hope, disruptive peace, disruptive joy, disruptive love--ready for God's kingdom to come in our lives and in this world, as it is in heaven.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.