

SHOCK

Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:36-44

Faith Community
December 2, 2007

Introduction

You come walking down the stairs and as you reach the last step your child jumps out and shouts, “Boo!” You practically jump out of your skin. Your child has been waiting for you and has hidden behind the wall. You both laugh after you get over the shock of the surprise. Later you come down the stairs and again are greeted with a loud “Boo!” It surprises you, but not the same way it did the first time. The next time you come down the stairs you can hear a little giggling coming from behind the wall. By the twentieth time your child shouts “Boo!” you aren’t surprised at all. You knew it was coming, of course, and you’re getting tired of it. You have become numb to this activity.

For people involved in the church, Advent can seem like that. We do it every year; we know just how it goes.

I

There isn’t any surprise to Advent anymore. It’s a time to prepare for Christmas, but in our culture that started at least a month ago. Thanksgiving used to be the beginning of the Christmas season, now Thanksgiving is just a bump in the road to Christmas. Many of us have rehearsed Advent with its theme of waiting and expectancy every year of our lives. There are no surprises. We’ve been there, done that.

I was telling a church member last week that this will be my 120th Advent sermon (four Sundays in Advent times 30 years). But I want you to know that I didn’t take his advice and dust off an Advent sermon from 1993 and see what needed to be updated. I’m going for the 120th new sermon.

We’ve become numb to Advent. We’ve been through it all before. Where is the shock in something you’ve done 120 times? It’s like the kid jumping out from behind the wall shouting “Boo!” We say, “Yea, yea, I saw it coming.”

Where is the surprise, the expectancy? You know how it all goes – who was born, where he was born, what the circumstances were – everything that happened.

II

Maybe it helps our preparation in Advent if we look at how this birth fits into the long sweep of history. Let’s look beyond who, when, where, and how. Instead, let’s ask “Why?”

Think of God’s relationship with humans. God created the world. He breathed life into human beings, and before long we messed the whole thing up, and there are the first man and woman out of the garden, naked, and ashamed. Actually, it only took one generation for the first murder to happen.

God stays with his people, but they end up in slavery. God comes to them and tells them that he cares that they aren't free and leads them on the long exodus journey toward the Promised Land.

Along the way he gives them the Ten Commandments to better know God's will, but Moses hasn't even come down from Mount Sinai before they are worshipping other gods. They couldn't even wait to get God's law before they wandered off.

When they get to the Promised Land, the priests teach and enforce God's will, but the people turn away. The same pattern is repeated over and over.

God sends the prophets who speak harsh words to warn the people of what will happen if they keep living the way they are. But they ignore the words of the prophets.

After all God has done, what is he to do now? Hasn't he tried everything? At this point you and I would probably give up. We'd say, "If they haven't figured it out by now, they aren't going to." You and I would throw up our hands and say, "I give up! You deserve what you get."

III

That would be a very human response; fortunately for us God isn't human. Apparently, God says, "I need to take it one step farther. I will do something that's never been done before. I'll think outside the box"—or in this case, outside the universe. God takes a dramatic, unheard of step and becomes human himself. God takes the form of a human being. More than that, God becomes a human being. God limits himself—sets aside his timelessness—to be limited in time. He gives up his formlessness to have a face and hands and feet and hair.

In some ways it is as if there was a veterinarian who loved dogs so much that he figured out a way to become a dog—to experience what it is like to be a dog. He gives up human abilities to take on the limitations of being canine. Can you imagine that kind of love?

IV

Maybe this year the amazement of Advent comes from looking at why God did what he did. In addition to experiencing the wonder of the baby in the manger in Bethlehem, and the wise men coming to visit, we can step back and try to fathom a God who would care about you and me so much that he would come to us in human form.

Strip back all the details of the story we know so well and try to conceive of God choosing to limit himself and come to us as a carpenter's boy. Think of everything Jesus gave up to do that for you and me.

Conclusion

The Reverend Alfred Delp was arrested by the Nazis because of his faithful Christian witness and was held in a concentration camp. As the Advent season arrived, he was more excited than he had been in all his years of celebrating Advent. There, in the confines of his prison cell, with everything taken away from him and not knowing what torment or challenge he might have to face, he found new excitement in this season.

He wrote, "How many things have we become used to in the course of the years, of the weeks and months, so that we stand unshocked, unstirred, inwardly unmoved. Advent is a time when we ought to be shaken and brought to a realization of ourselves. I see Advent this year with greater intensity and anticipation than ever before. Walking up and down in my cell, three paces this way and three paces that way, with my hands in irons and ahead of me an uncertain fate, I have a new and different understanding of God's promise of redemption and release."

There, amid the horrors of prison and war, he was brought back to what God had done at the nativity, and he was thrilled.

The shock of Advent is still there, we only have to scratch the surface to be amazed at the length God's love will go for you and me. Divine, almighty, omnipotent God is born a tiny squirming baby in the chill night air of a distant little village.

Can God really love us that much?

Amen