

**The Rev. Christopher Bishop  
St. Martin's Church, Radnor, PA  
First Advent, Sunday Nov. 27, 2011**

### *Surprised by God?*

**My most vivid memory of Advent** growing up was the time I was in high school. Despite myself I had become involved in a church youth group. It was despite myself because I was too cool for a church group. Long blond hair, hard to believe now, I know, down way past my shoulders. I was asked to read the part of the angel Gabriel in that year's pageant. I wore a long white robe. I had on heavy Goth black eye make-up—I was going all out, we all were. My brother Matt was Joseph, but a handsome, strapping, 115 lbs weight class high school wrestler Joseph, contending with angels and self-doubt. The place was packed.

**What I remember** most occurred after the service. There was a parish gathering, and a woman walked up to me and said, "My God, at first I thought you were a girl!" Now as you can imagine this is not what a cool high school hippy wants to hear. And then she said, "But the minute you opened your mouth with your booming voice, it completely shocked me and freaked me out. Woke me up!" Now, I have a couple of reasons for telling you this story. The first is that we have a pageant coming up here at Christmas. And these sorts of community creations give us a chance to both encounter the material in the flesh, and enact together a common formative story of our faith. Kathy Wynn has written a new script, and we invite you to help create a pageant full of fun, ease, and joy. I'll say more about that in the announcements.

**The second reason** I tell that story is in recognition as to the reason why I remember it, of all the pageants I did growing up. It's because of the shock the lady spoke of. The shock of the girl with the voice of a young man. And it clearly delighted her. And that got me to thinking about Advent. What's actually going on? Advent. Something coming, approaching, arriving. And this thing that seems to be a huge part of it, that Jesus speaks to today and the lady in the church, and that is surprise. Being surprised. And the obvious question, are we, can we really be surprised by the celebration of the birth of Christ?

**I was speaking with a couple** of our children this week, and I asked what they love about Christmas, really love. And, not surprisingly, they said— no not the coming of God among us to reconcile the whole world— but presents! And I said great, what do you love about

getting presents? The boy said, “Its exciting cause you get stuff you really like,” and his sister said, “And you don’t have to ask for anything anymore because you have what you want.”

**And I started thinking** about it and thought Yeah, at it’s best, that’s what Advent is, for all of us. The possibility of getting something we really want that, best of all, provides a freedom, a new way of being that gives us access to this cataclysmic event of God and its possibilities. Cataclysmic if we but pay attention to what our church, what we here, celebrate. Isaiah with customary flourish calls out to God: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence.”

**Wouldn’t that be great?** What if we got a taste of God tearing open the heavens and revealing the possibility of that kind of power, that presence, for all to see? In the midst of these visions of God coming, being born among us, our lectionary then goes and gives us what seems to be a strange juxtaposition: the glorious commencement of Advent leading to Jesus’ birth, and Jesus’ description of the end of time, the Day of the Lord. Just as we want the warm, fuzzy, Christmas spirit, we have this description now of the end of everything. So today is the last day. But it’s also the first day. And we are once again faced with the question, “So, how we gonna be in this world of beginnings and endings?”

**Some interpret this scripture’s** description of Jesus coming again as a call to sit and wait patiently for Jesus arrival. Proclamation is sufficient. Others of us just ignore it as quaint but outmoded imagery, perhaps signifying something, but distant from our understanding. In these questions I am drawn to Elsa Tamez, a South American theologian who writes of living in a “militant eschatological hope”, eschatology – about the end of things. What the two approaches of either sitting and waiting for Jesus, or ignoring the story as fable, provide is a perfect excuse to do... nothing. Tamez provides a 3<sup>rd</sup> way of entering this story.

**What living in militant** eschatological hope really asks is, Ok, it’s the last day, what are you gonna do? Sit with your fingers crossed and wait for Jesus? Go about business as usual? I suspect not. What would you do, and for the love of God, with a certain end hanging over all of us at some point, why aren’t we doing it now? Living in this kind of hope means getting in the game and being in the world, impacting for the good the lives of others. Being Christ in the world.

**Whenever I hear End Times** language, it always comes back to my own context, as it does for each of us. For me it's always, "What if I lived as if it were true?" Well first, how do we know its true? We don't. And that's the point. Belief is not the point. Belief is sometimes hard, sometimes we don't really believe at all. We will have questions and some of those questions will never be answered. And we always have the option of doing nothing, or just what is convenient. But we know that there are consequences to inaction, apathy, or indifference to the lives of others. We saw it at Penn State, we see it in the headlines of our newspapers every day.

**What if we did live** as if it were true? This God of all creation come among us? When we read this text of Mark's, we tend to think about the things of this world passing. Well, science tells us with certainty that this earth as we know it will come to an end. It will happen. But what is in Mark's Gospel is fundamentally not a glimpse of destruction but a promise. Once we, or gravity, or time itself destroys everything, God is that which will not pass away. Yes, it's all gonna end, but the power of the Word of God will endure. The promise of that Word being, literally, that which endures no matter what. When the stars and planets are extinguished, when the universe collapses in upon itself, the Word will endure.

**So isn't that something to live for?** For that which the universe itself cannot destroy? To live as active embodiments God's limitless grace? Shouldn't we be taking that into ourselves, being used by it to glorify God and heal God's world in all of our relationships, all our dealings? And, if we did, wouldn't that be truly surprising? Cataclysmic?

**Cataclysmic like the birth** of a little baby, in a barn. In speaking with one of our mothers I asked what she felt during Advent, what was her direct access to it? And she said it's in her memory of being a new mother, holding her babies. And she wanted her Advent this year to feel, somehow, like that. That close. That exciting. And we can create that, and other wondrous things here. My question is, what is your access to the birth of God, and the promise of God's eternal presence that this Advent really lifts among us? As a 17 year old mine was Goth make-up and startling a stranger as Gabriel. What will yours be now?

**And irrespective as to whether** this foretelling of events is true in its particularity, even if the end all turns out to be different than anyone can imagine, all we will have done is bring some goodness and love into the world. And that brings me back to the question I have

asked before—why does it feel good, to do good? Why does it touch us so deeply when we see the sacrifice and kindness of others? Maybe it's the Kingdom of God breaking in to give us a glimpse of its joy. Just as Jesus' birth, if we are awake and alive to it, breaks into our world with utterly new possibilities for new life, year after year.

**In the name of the One God, whose spirit is always born anew through us, Amen.**