



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

December 23, 2007

Advent 4A  
Rev. Donna Barr

Author and Episcopal priest, Fleming Rutledge collects Advent stories from The New York Times. Hold on to your seat -here they come. A funeral was held in Belgium for one of the little girls who was slowly and systematically starved to death in a dungeon by a man so perverted that he was disowned by his own mother. At the Roman Catholic funeral, the priest's hand trembled violently as he recalled the passionate prayers said for the children all over Belgium. In a voice of intense anger he said, "Is the good Lord deaf?" That is an Advent question, says Fleming Rutledge. Here is another from the Times. A woman told of praying for her husband's safety the night before he took off on Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie. After his death in the explosion, she said her view of God changed. "I don't dislike him," she said. "I'm not mad at him. I'm afraid of him." That idea, too, belongs to Advent. It is the season of fear.

Many people do not want to hear these things during Christmas. That is understandable. But as T.S. Elliott famously said, "Human kind cannot bear very much reality." We would rather build fantasy castles around ourselves, decked out with angles and candles. And by the way, Americans now spend several hundred million dollars a year on scented candles, frequently marked as "spiritual aids." This is precisely the sort of illusion about spiritual health that the church, in Advent, refuses to promote. Our most recent tragedies of the random killings at a Mall and two churches must surely remind us that Advent begins in the dark. I have just finished reading, "A Thousand Splendid Suns," a terrifying account of the abuse and torture of women in Afghanistan. Advent begins in the dark. My own personal prayers for this season included a family who instead of celebrating the birth of a healthy child, now face the realities of a down syndrome child - where life is uncertain at best; my prayers extend to my childhood friend who has exhausted all cancer treatments; to my 96 year old friend who mostly sits and looks out her window and complains of nothing but being lonely; I will be praying for my friend who struggles one day at a time.....sometimes one moment at a time from addition; and my prayers will be sounded for my friends who have broken relationships with parents or children; I, myself will be remembering the darkness of Advent, the time of year when both of my parents died. This Christmas Eve, many of us may find it hard to believe the words of "Silent Night" when we sing them. All is calm and all is bright. Although we may know it is a holy night, for which we have kept watch for weeks, our spirits are likely to feel overwhelmed and full of fear.....And there is plenty of fear to go around in all of our lives and the world. Advent begins in the dark and so the question begs, "Where is our God?...and is he deaf?"

This is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of the end. As any theologians have pointed out, the church lives in Advent, "The Time Between." In a very real sense, the entire Christian life is lived in Advent, between the first and second comings of the Lord, in the tension between the way things are and the way things ought to be.

Four times in the Gospel record of the great event of Christmas the message is sent from God to man -- "Fear Not". It is the continuing message of God throughout the Bible, from the Garden of Eden to the Book of Revelation. Eighty times the message comes clear and strong - "Fear Not". From angels, prophets, apostles, martyrs and Christ himself comes the command, appeal and exhortation to "Fear Not".

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*Established in 1847*

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Let us consider for a moment the last Gospel story we read as we move rather quickly from this the fourth Sunday of Advent to tomorrow night's scene in the manger. Joseph has a visitor who appears to him in a dream. In our new translation the messenger declares, "Do not be afraid." But my friends this is a story truly filled with its own fear.

From the moment of the annunciation to the Virgin Mary, who asked a logical question of her heavenly visitor—"How shall this be?"- and Joseph has a visitor who appears to him in a dream - to the tense negotiations around the possibility of a divorce on grounds of infidelity, to the desperate search for suitable lodgings at the most vulnerable moment in a woman's life, the very moment of childbirth, the birth of Christ has from the outset been a very precarious thing. It was anything but smooth. Anything but reassuring. Not a thing about it suggested that this was going to be safe. It was dangerous in every way - a situation that required great faith in God on the part of all concerned. What Mary and Joseph felt must have been raw fear. But the birth of Christ is also a profound story about hope in God in the face of terrible adversity: a poor young couple in an occupied country coping with a difficult and uncertain situation. Only now, after it is over, do we see reassurance and redemption in it. Henri Nouwen writes that Jesus always speaks about hope. And his hope is different from optimism. Jesus is not an optimist. Optimism arranges reality in a way that enables us to say things will get better. Jesus speaks about hope that is not based on chances that things will get better. His hope is built upon the promise that, whatever happens, God will stay with us at all times, in all places. God is the God of life. As his followers, we are called to be people of hope -caring and praying for each other but we can never have hope without first facing fear. Like many other Pan Am 103 families, the woman who fears God and lost her husband has given herself in service to others who have lost loved ones in air crashes. She has not just lit candles, but has chosen to go out among others who suffer. In an odd way, fear is what allows us to recognize the holy in our midst.

Today, it is still Advent ... but tomorrow we begin the sanctification of all our sorrows, all our fears, every burden we bear. Tomorrow we begin a journey that can only begin in fear and only end in hope. To be a Christian is, yes, to live our lives with those who sit in darkness and fear, but also to live in the unshakable hope of those who expect the dawn. In Advent we sing, "Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our FEARS and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee." Tomorrow we will sing "Oh, little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Our hopes and fears through all the years are met in thee tonight." And the angel of the Lord said unto them....."Fear Not, For Behold I bring you good news"

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