

Nov. 28, 2004
Matthew 24:
First Parish Church
©Mary Beard

Out of the Ordinary

'Tis the season when we are selecting Christmas cards to send to folk who are far away, yet still dear to us. What image will convey the message we intend to send? As they say, "a picture is worth a thousand words." Our family enjoys using the cards we receive as part of our holiday decorations. If someone looked at all those cards what would they think Christmas is all about?

Art has a way of drawing us in and capturing our imaginations. Over the centuries there have been innumerable depictions of the Christmas story. One of those paintings, "The Numbering at Bethlehem," by Pieter Brueghel, at first glance, appears to be an ordinary midwinter scene in a Flemish town in the 16th century. I'm sorry to say that I don't have a copy for each of you, so I'll have to do second best and use words. In the little snow covered village the streets are filled with holiday activities:

- A wreath hangs over the door of one of the shops
- A young man is flirting with a maiden
- A farmer and his wife butcher a pig for someone's holiday feast
- A laborer struggles with an overloaded cart of firewood
- Children are skating on a ice-covered pond
- A crowd of people are gathered at the local tax office to be counted for the census and to pay taxes.

It appears to be a typical, busy, ordinary December day. However, if you look more closely, you will see, down toward the bottom of the canvas, there in the middle of the street, an unassuming man, carrying a bag of tools

and leading a small donkey, trudging through the snow. On the donkey's back, with an old blanket thrown over her shoulders to shelter her from the cold, is a humble young woman. (*A Pilgrim People*, by John Westerhoff, pg. 54)

Knowing the story, we realize this is an out of the ordinary arrival. In the midst of the ordinary happenings of the daily grind a most out of the ordinary event takes place – Emmanuel – God with us.

How different this picture is from what most of the people of Jesus' time, who were waiting for the Messiah, envisioned. Their imagined painting of the Messiah's arrival would more likely be:

- Streets teeming with people – rich and poor; beggars and merchants
- People pushing in trying to get a first look.
- Jewish soldiers (not Roman ones) trying to keep a path clear.
- Trumpets blaring; flags fluttering in the breeze
- And here he comes...
riding on a mighty steed
dressed in full regalia
the coming one
The Messiah!

Now, that's more like it.

However, our God is a surprising and mysterious God and comes into the world as all of us did- in the ordinary way – not as a great warrior, but as a child.

As one who is
helpless, and yet amazingly strong
fragile, and yet so alive
needy, and yet gives such great joy
dependent, and yet so full of potential.

In this season when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, with the focal image of our painting being a sweet, healthy, peaceful baby, it is easy for this to become a season of nostalgia. Maybe that is why, as a counter balance, the lectionary gospel text for this first Sunday of Advent is always one about the future coming of the 'Son of Man', which can be translated "The Human One." They are texts that startle us out of our ordinary cozy sentimentalities. To realize how out of sync with our typical holiday festivities these images are, imagine asking a child what she wants for Christmas, and receiving the response, "I want Jesus to come again." How many of us are waiting on the edge of our seats for the 'second coming?'

With the way that many in our culture have defined 'the second coming,' I have to tell you that I'm not waiting on the edge of my seat. However, the popularity of Tim Lahaye's *Left Behind* series indicates that some people are doing just that. The title for that series comes from passages like today's where it says "two are in the field, one is taken and one will be left." I confess I haven't read the books, which is an intentional decision on my part. I haven't read them because I don't find my hope in believing that some will be left behind - the idea being that I should be sure to do everything possible to make sure I'm not one of them. My experience of Jesus is that he did everything possible (everything!) to be sure that no one was left behind.

I suspect these 'end times,' future coming of the 'Son of Man' passages, originally spoke to the ways in which Jesus did not fulfill in the present all that the Jews had envisioned the coming of the Messiah would entail. The Romans were still in power. In fact, they had crucified Jesus. The nation of Israel had not been restored. In fact, by the time of the writing of the gospels, the temple of Zion (Jerusalem) had been destroyed. The early Christian communities were communities under great stress, due to their development within and in tension with the rest of the

Jewish community, and due to their oppression from the Roman authorities. We can understand their passionate belief that Jesus *has* to come again and make things right.

Today, these passages of a future coming speak to our awareness that even though Jesus has been with us, the world is still a 'work in progress.' The principalities and powers still run roughshod over the people. We suffer alienation from one another and from God. We grieve profoundly at the deaths of those we love. These passages speak to the reality that we humans are incapable of bringing about the kingdom on our own. O God, help us! Come!

They also remind us that we never know when Christ is going to show up. Everything can be so ordinary. We can be eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, out in the field, grinding meal, sleeping in the house.... and suddenly 'The Human One' is there.

It is into the very ordinariness of the world that a most out of the ordinary presence appears. Madeleine L'Engle put it eloquently in her writing,

First Coming by Madeleine 'Engle

*God did not wait till the world was ready,
till...nations were at peace.*

*God came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.*

*God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was deep and great.
God dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. God did not wait*

*till hearts were pure. In joy God came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
God came, and God's Light would not go out.*

God came to a world which did not mesh,

*to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*

God came. God will come. And God comes again and again and again. It can be both so ordinary and so extraordinary. Will we be awake enough to notice? Will we have the eyes to see the image of God in the flesh we encounter? How many recognized God in Jesus? How often do we recognize Christ in one another?

A number of years ago I attended a workshop led by John Westerhoff, a noted Christian Educator. He commented on what a different world it would be if we imagined that walking in front of us and everyone we meet there was a host of angels shouting, "Make way for the image of God! Make way for the image of God!" (Westerhoff, pg. 40)

In the coming weeks, our denomination, the United Church of Christ, is embarking on an out of the ordinary means for sharing the good news. At least out of the ordinary for us. We will be conducting our first national advertising campaign, "God is still speaking." The phrase "God is still speaking" is derived from a quote from Gracie Allen, "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." (You can learn more about the whole project at www.stillspeaking.com or www.ucc.org)

Those developing the ads met with focus groups of non-church folk around the country. The predominant response was that people experienced a very personal alienation from the church. Everyone had a story of the failure of the church to "be there" or "to be open to all." And most of the people had never heard of the United Church of Christ.

There are two TV ads, which will hit the airwaves. One of the ads portrays a little girl reciting the verse, "Here's the church, here's the steeple..." It's a very comfortable ad. The other ad, which I believe is being aired first, portrays two "bouncers". They are standing at the front steps of the church, and allowing some in and preventing others from entering. It concludes with the words, "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we." The feeling of this ad is much more "edgy." Many UCC members, including at the meeting held here at First Parish, have expressed concern about this ad. However of the two ads, the un-churched have indicated it is "The Bouncer" ad that communicates to them that they are welcome.

"The Bouncer" ad reminds me of part of the Christmas story – of Mary and Joseph's arrival at the inn, where they are turned away. It is often those who have been unwelcome and turned away that understand the impact of this image. That's why more than one church has experienced a scene like this: a physically large, but developmentally slow boy is selected to be the innkeeper in the Christmas pageant. It's a small role. Besides he looks imposing. All he has to do is turn Mary and Joseph away -- which he does, when they first arrive. They plead. He holds firm. But as they turn away, tears begin to well in the boy's eyes. He reaches out to them, crying out, "Don't go. You can have *my* room."

As people visit us in the coming weeks, and the pews are full, will we reach out, saying, "here you can have my seat?"

Christ came. Christ will come. And Christ comes again and again and again. Let us make way for the image of God!

