Distraction Second Sunday in Advent (C)  
4 December 1994  
St. George's Episcopal Church  
Le Mars, Iowa  
Donald Wacome, Lay preacher

**The Power of Distraction**

Tuesday evening I came home and turned on the TV. "NBC Dateline" was on and Woody Allen was being interviewed. I'm a Woody Allen fan, so I watched. After some predictable questions about child custody battles and movie making, Bob Cox, the interviewer, asked "What do you have faith in?" The question came out of left field. It was one of those moments when grace seems to nudge the regular course of events off track, creating a silence into which something totally unexpected might enter. It wasn't the sort of question Woody Allen was ready to answer. He hesitated, squirming a bit, obviously thinking 'what sort of question is this?' Finally, he answers: "What do I have faith in? I have faith in the power of distraction." The world, he said, is an unhappy, painful place; the best we can do is find distraction from it in romance and art. This cynical, sad answer was, I think, pretty honest, one we need to pay attention to. It's the voice of a certain wisdom, of a forlorn resignation, the sober counsel of those who have given up foolish hopes for profound help and healing in favor of a mature appraisal of things in the cold light of day. It's the voice of lowered expectations and if not despair, at least of something coming close to it, for it's the counsel of a world into which no grace breaks. We'd better grab whatever peace and pleasure we can find in this life, says this worm, worldly advice. There's nothing wonderful to wait for.

I suppose there's nothing particularly modern about this point of view. Even if Woody Allen does us the service of being honest and clear about it, it's common to the human condition. No doubt, there were many in first century Israel resigned to the Roman occupation, to the slow loss of national identity, to the silence of the prophets, to God's apparent forgetfulness of his promises. Giving up wild messianic hopes, they faced up to the relentless demands of, and occasional welcome distractions from, the hardness of daily life. If God is far off, unconcerned or nonexistent, if there is finally no help and healing from One who is greater than us, then let's put our faith in distraction, getting on with our lives, cutting our losses, hedging our bets, avoiding pain and disappointment as best we can, not holding out for what is, after all, just too good to be true.

This is the world into which Christ comes. Hope for some glorious, thundering revelation from the Infinite had almost died out, but now, out of the silence and darkness, comes a helpless infant's cry. The gift of the child Christ: in place of the power of distraction, the power of incarnate love, the power of redemption, presents himself. Hope in God vindicated; his love for us taking flesh. Too good to be true? Wishful thinking? So says the jaded wisdom of the world. That voice comes from within us, as well as from outside.

Advent's penitential dimension invites us to examine ourselves so we can renew our welcome of the Savior into our lives. Part of that is honestly acknowledging the inner wounds of doubt and disbelief, of recognizing the depth to which we regard God as inaccessible and indifferent, and the degree to which we've resigned ourselves to living with that.

There is, of course, simple doubt. Is it really true? Is there a loving God? Is Mary's baby who we confess him to be, or is it all just a wonderful story, one that brightens dark times and makes us feel good once a year, but not, ultimately, where those who know what's what put their faith? In today's gospel reading Luke, that careful writer, takes pains to pull John's proclamation of the coming Christ out of the realm of myths and warm feelings and to nail it down on the background of political and ecclesiastical administration, anchoring it securely in a real time, a real place, not in our dreams but in the real world, connected, ultimately, to our lives. And yet, whatever fine and wise things the man this child became said, we should turn back to real life and place our trust in what Woody Allen calls the power of distraction - unless this child actually was God fully, impossibly, here with us and for us. As St. Paul said many years later: if Jesus did not rise from the dead --- if the one we thought came as a child to defeat death is himself dead --- then "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Luke, Paul, and the Bible's other authors make no claim to prove beyond all doubt that Mary's son was who we confess him to be. Nor are we capable of proving it. Our calling is to live without proof and thus with the possibility of doubt. A stanza of W.H. Auden's poem 'Atlantis,' in which the quest for the lost mythical land represents his hard journey from despair of life's distractions to faith in Christ:

> **Should storms as may well happen**  
> **Drive you to anchor a week**  
> **In some old harbour-city**  
> **Of Ionia, then speak**  
> **With her witty scholars, men**  
> **Who have proved there cannot be**  
> **Such a place as Atlantis:**  
> **Learn their logic, but notice**  
> **How their subtlety betrays**  
> **A simple enormous grief:**  
> **Thus they may teach you the ways**  
> **To doubt that you may believe.**

Faithfully questioning ourselves this advent does not call for denying doubt, nor for trying to replace it with certainty. The opposite of doubt is faith, and we must see that living in faith doesn't mean always feeling sure. It can mean acting trustfully just when we're unsure. Part of faith is relying on God, in his own time, to transform our doubt into firm belief.

Another, perhaps deeper, part of our Advent self-examination might be to ask ourselves in what ways have the springs of faith and hope gone dry, to what extent have we imperceptibly grown to accept the world's sad sobriety, the wishful cynicism Woody Allen expressed, that says, even for us, the only real healing power is the power of distraction, of getting by as though God's love for us has not become flesh in the real world of our daily lives. Here we need to repent of our resignation, of lowered expectations and if not despair, at least of something coming close to it, for it's the counsel of a world into which no grace breaks. We'd better grab whatever peace and pleasure we can find in this life, says this worm, worldly advice. There's nothing wonderful to wait for.

Our prayer this Advent can be that our Savior make us more convinced in our thoughts, feelings and actions that beyond all doubt and hope there is a God neither nonexistent nor remote but sharing our lives, taking responsibility for us. It's at all times and in all places easy to think, in our hearts, of God at work safely far away, in the religious past, in the natural world, anywhere but here and now. Our calling is to be not distracted but amazed. We are called to believe that God has so humbled himself as to make his work in this world what we in our faltering faith do. God is at work here, now, in our hands, and if not in us, perhaps nowhere. This Church, we believe, but just barely, is the body of Christ, human flesh tied in trust to God and brought to life by his Spirit: God remains incarnate: here we are; here he is. Christ has come. Christ will come again. In the meantime the seasons of Advent come and go, but God is truly present in this old sad world. In the face of doubt and against the pull of despair: persisting in prayer, in the ministry of word and sacrament, in firm faith and merciful action, bearing witness to God's faithful presence as the Christ child.
as the crucified and risen Savior, and here and now in us.