

Gate-crashing God: Psalm 72; Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

by [Rosalind Brown](#) in the [November 18, 1998](#) issue

Advent is a time to recall that it is not our own unpredictable desire for God that shapes our history, but God's faithfulness. Yes, Advent is a season to make our longing conscious. But primarily it is a season to become more aware of the God who creates that longing in us. A phrase from the Collect for the Presence of Christ in the Episcopal service of evening prayer expresses the Advent theme well. "Kindle our hearts and awaken hope . . ." Advent is the season of hope awakened not by our changing circumstances and fickle emotions but by the action of God in our lives, igniting the dying embers, setting fire to our passion and searing us in a way that means we are forever changed and bear the scorch marks of that flame. We shouldn't get through Advent unscathed by God.

Advent hope is about God coming, and thus Advent asks us to rediscover hope as a sure and certain foundation for our lives. Unfortunately for our culture of instant gratification, hope requires incompleteness. To hope, in the true sense of the word, is to live with the certainty of unfulfilled desire. The joy--and the challenge--of Advent is that in Jesus Christ our God is coming, and our aching and longing for God will be met.

But this God who comes is disturbing. We see it in the proclamation of John, who shatters the silence of the wilderness with the cry, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Not just "repent," change the way you live, but repent and prepare for the coming of the kingdom of heaven which will ruffle all your securities and overturn anything you try to leave in place.

Gate-crashing God, who took our flesh  
and heaven's hope to earth unfurled;  
Your kingdom come! O raise our sights  
until your ways transform our world.\*

The incarnation is about God taking an unprepared world by storm, gate-crashing our human party and living out among us the vision and model of a new kingdom. As Odo Casel once wrote, "The Spirit of God is something disturbing, driving . . . for he

desires to turf us out of our everydayness." Do we have the commitment to stay in the place of disturbance, the uncomfortable place where the Advent God is? It is rarely safe to long for God, and impossible if we are unwilling to be changed.

A few years ago a newspaper obituary said of a British radio news program host, "You didn't exactly meet Brian Redhead, or work with him: he happened to you. You were drawn in by his energy and inner passion for a sharp, clean, balanced, better world free of humbug, cliques and pretension." That's not unlike what happens when God comes.

John greeted those who came to him with the demand for repentance and baptism, or rebuffed them as a brood of vipers--hardly a gentle welcome from God. Why these demands? Because so much has gone so very wrong. Our world is full of injustice, oppression and unrighteousness, so something has to give when God enters this world, and it is not going to be God.

God draws us into another scenario. The Advent scriptures are full of promises of righteousness, justice and rescue for the poor and oppressed. That was what the king was to provide for his people, and it is no coincidence that in Psalm 72, a prayer for the king, the poor get four mentions and the prayer is that the king will rule righteously and bring justice. Because the blessing on the king is a blessing on the people, our Advent hope is assured. The coming king is a king after God's heart. If our hope excludes the possibility of righteousness and justice, we will be disappointed.

Righteousness is a theme in Isaiah which dates from a time of despair, failed kings and impending doom from the Assyrians. Hope is at its most stark when the circumstances are at their worst, and if we read Isaiah 11 without reading the earlier chapters we miss the outrageousness of this hope. God's passion is salvation, God's hope sees beyond the human mess and calls out, "Repent," whereas we would write the situation off as hopeless.

Repentance allows for the possibility of change. The God who calls us to repent was once called on by Moses to repent and did so. God is a God who doggedly pursues wayward people, holding out the possibility of life when situations point to death. So we have a shoot growing from a stump, fruit from the roots of a felled tree, and a return to paradise where animals live at peace. The wolf dwells with the lamb. The dangerous, predatory animal is invited to sojourn with its prey. The enemy is made

the guest. The poor and vulnerable need not fear, but can welcome their oppressors. That is the undreamed-of result of God's righteousness and justice.

There are no boundaries to Advent hope, because there are no boundaries to God. God keeps pushing back the boundaries we try to set, and filling us with joy and peace so that we are supplied with hope.

God of hope and God of healing,  
ever turning lives around,  
come restore, come reinspire us,  
heal the hearts that fear has bound.

Hope-filled God, you keep enlarging  
boundaries we try to set;  
raise our sights to new horizons,  
greater dreams than we dream yet.\*\*

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