

Everyone touched by Jesus' coming might have preferred some advance notice or perhaps a more suitable time, but God's timing does not for wait a more convenient season. Paul, who had great insight into how God acts, wrote: *When the time had fully come, God sent forth a Son, born of woman...to redeem those who were under the law* (Gal. 4:4-5).

There are two words for "time" in Greek: *Chronos* and *Kairos*. *Chronos* is time measured by clocks and calendars. *Kairos* is time qualified by meaning and purpose, time that is measured by revelation and fulfillment. So when Paul writes that "the time had fully come," the word is *kairos*. God's time. Time with divine purpose and intention.

Jesus came into the world in *kairos* to fulfill God's purpose, which means that human factors and the conditions of the world were not the determining factors, no matter how propitious they may have been. That is why the birth at Bethlehem surprised everyone and was overlooked by many.

Still Jesus comes today according to God's purpose and timing and not necessarily according to the devout petitions of the religious or because of a particular crisis in human history. Moreover, when Jesus comes again at the "end time," it will be at God's initiative and not in some year, month, or day calculated by self-appointed prophets who have derived their indicators by interpreting certain prophetic references from the Bible. As Jesus himself declared: *For the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect* (Matt. 24:44).

That is why, when Jesus comes today, his coming almost always catches us off guard and takes us by surprise. He comes unannounced. In the midst of some ordinary helter-skelter day we meet him and our world is never the same again. He may come to us when we struggle to bear our private burden with courage and dignity. He may come to us at the crossroads where we wrestle with a pivotal decision and are not sure we want to make a commitment. He may come to us at boundary moments of illness.

Dan McClimon was the very popular track and field coach at the University of Wisconsin until his death in a small plane crash. Some years before that tragedy, the McClimons' fourth-grade son, Timmy, died of leukemia. At that time Dan McClimon quietly shared with friends an incident that brought him the strength he needed to carry on:

As Timmy lay in the hospital, still clear-eyed and bright but nearing the end, Dan said to him, "Don't be afraid, son. The Lord is waiting to hold you." The boy replied, "I know He is Daddy. Can't you see him? He's standing there beside you."

Jesus may come to us in the midst of a great joy and in moments of celebration. On several occasions I've had mothers tell me how Jesus came to them as they held their child for the first time. Others have shared how Jesus joined them in moments of reconciliation and reunion. Athletes have testified how Jesus drew near to them when they gave their all, both in victory and loss.

Jesus may also come to us in the life of another person whose need evokes our caring concern and love. That is how Jesus came with surprise to Francis of Assisi in a leper whom Francis was moved to embrace along the road one day. Jesus came to Toyohiko Kagawa in an abandoned sick child of the Shinkawa slums of Kobe, Japan, whom he brought to his little hut and cared for as his son. Mother Teresa wrote of how she met Jesus in those whose head she cradled and whose dignity she restored in their dying. Teachers have met Jesus' surprising presence in vexing students; employers have met Jesus in troublesome employees; salespeople have met Jesus in unlikely customers; and some of us have met Jesus in strangers whose encounter with us left a blessing that we still carry.

We never know when Jesus will come to us today. That is why our faith journey is never monotonous or hopeless. When we least expect it, under circumstances that are not conducive, in situations where all possibility is exhausted and hope has dimmed, in hellish settings that contradict all that is meant by love and faith, Jesus comes. He comes in the power of the Resurrection and with the promise of God's love that never lets us go. We are never beyond his saving touch. He will go to any lengths to find us. Nothing can keep him from coming, not even our bad faith or our unfaith.

A December 1987 column in *Sojourners* magazine captured how this happens:

I wasn't making much progress on a sermon approach when the 8:18 A.M. H-2 bus arrived right on time, a minor miracle of sorts if you know anything about adherence to bus schedules in the District of Columbia. Since it was the day after Christmas, very few people were on the usually crowded bus. In fact the bus was nearly empty, with the exception of some developmentally disabled people who ride the H-2 on their way to jobs elsewhere in the city. A young woman and a couple of older women sat near the front while three younger men were seated toward the rear. They were busily and happily talking with each other.

Since my thinking about the sermon was not bearing much fruit, I decided to set the passage aside until another time and listen to the conversations going on between

the front and back of the bus. The passengers were very excited and animated as they told each other about their Christmas experiences, what they had given each other, what gifts they had received, what they ate for Christmas dinner, and so on.

As the conversation died down, one of the young men in the back started to softly sing “Silent Night.” He had just finished the first verse when one of the women in the front turned to him and harshly scolded him, saying “Shhh! Shhh! No, no, stop singing that. That’s for Christmas. That was yesterday. It’s over now.” I was somewhat reluctantly agreeing with her logic when the young man ever so gently, but firmly, replied, “No, no, that’s not true. It’s only just beginning. It’s only just beginning.”

Jesus comes at unlikely moments in unexpected places, like on city buses, transforming them and us with the power of his presence and the persuasion of God’s love.

Prayer: God, we are as confounded as Joseph and Mary, as busy as the innkeepers, as lonely as the shepherds, as frightened as Herod, as wayfaring as the Magi. Turn us again to the place where, with quietness, you wrap up your truth and promise, your love and salvation in the Child born in a rude stable. We would ponder these things as the noise and clamor of the world is stilled for a time and there is a peace that settles deep within us. Bring us to Bethlehem, to the place where he was homeless but where we are truly at home. Amen.

Source: Donald J. Shelby. *The Unsettling Season: Advent-Christmas-Epiphany*. Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN. 1989. Pgs. 81-89.

When Jesus Came – and Comes!

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 11:1-9

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 1:26-35

Some surprises are good surprises: friends throw you a birthday party, you get a letter from a friend, you receive an unexpected gift, the pregnancy test is positive, a hoped for promotion comes through, or an opportunity presents itself. Other surprises are not so good: the dryer quits, the car blows a tire, the tax bill is higher, the diagnosis is serious, or the call brings news that a loved one is dead. Surprises are a part of life, but not always a welcome one.

The Bible is filled with surprises, too. Abraham and Sarah, a couple advanced in years, have a son. Moses, hiding in the wilderness, is called to lead God’s people to freedom. David, the youngest son, is anointed as king. Jeremiah, the carefree youth, is called to be a prophet. Mary Magdalene, a woman on the fringes of society, is the first to see the risen Christ. Paul, a righteous Pharisee, meets Jesus on a dusty road and becomes the greatest Christian of his day. Mary, a young woman betrothed to Joseph, is visited by an angel who declares, *Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus* (Luke 1:28-31).

The coming of Jesus brought one divine surprise after another for Mary, for Joseph, for the shepherds, for the religious officials in Jerusalem. We can understand Mary and Joseph’s startled reactions at what God was asking them to be and to do. We can understand the shepherds’ confusion by the divine announcement that interrupted their dreary routine. We can even understand the Pharisees’ resistance to Jesus’ claims to be the Son of God, since they expected a warrior king like David, not a child in a manger.