

Advent Surprises

By David Wood

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel makes a direct connection between the person of faith and the capacity for surprise. The person who is no longer capable of surprise, who no longer finds themselves overwhelmed by the reality of this world—its beauty, the sheer fact of its existence—is a person whose spiritual sensibilities have become numb, non-responsive to what is.

Given the surprising revelation of God that Advent heralds and following Rabbi Heschel's lead, perhaps a question we ought to raise in this Advent season is: "When was the last time we were taken by surprise?"

To be sure, I have a particular kind of surprise in view. It is akin to the experience of being overwhelmed, of being woken up, of being startled to an awareness in a way that changes you in some way.

Even repentance, which, of course, is one of the ways we are called to respond in this season, can have the character of this kind of surprise.

No one names this better than Frederick Beuchner: *To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'*

The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa talks of this kind of surprising experience as an experience of resonance. Resonance, in his view, names a way of being in the world that is most congruent with what it means to be a human being—to be fully alive.

Rosa identifies four elements indicative of a resonant experience. The first is affection: the experience of being moved, touched, called by something or someone beyond us. The second characteristic is emotion: we respond. Not only are we reached by something or someone, but we reach out, we make a connection. Our response is an answer that comes from deep within us. Thirdly, resonant experience is transformative: we are changed in some way by this encounter. It is the feeling of being fully alive. And, fourthly, it is uncontrollable, illusive—it takes us by surprise. We can't predict it, manufacture it, produce it, or control it. We can only receive it. It always has the character of a gift, of grace.

Interestingly, in the course of his discussion about resonant experience, Rosa identifies a Christian worship service as a context conducive to resonance. Of course, no context or set of conditions can guarantee a resonance experience—but there are elements of a typical worship service and the tradition that forms it that are promising.

For example, the community of worship is gathered by the confession "that at the root of our existence, at the heart of our being, there is not a silent, indifferent, or repulsive universe, dead matter or blind mechanisms, but a process of resonance and response: someone who hears us and sees us and who finds ways and means to touch us and to respond, who breathes life into us in the first place."

The very act of worship invites a posture of openness, receptiveness, and vulnerability—to those with whom one gathers and the God to whom one prays. In stark contrast to the larger culture, in which the past is obsolete, the present fleeting, and the future precarious, worship (through practices of remembrance, prayer, proclamation, and Eucharist) weaves past, present, and future into a narrative arc of redemptive relationship.

Resonance is by no means a given. To the contrary. Rosa claims that there are strong currents in late modern life that condition us to an accelerated pace of life in which we learn to move through life without being moved by it. We become accomplished at controlling our environments more than living in a relationship of response and receptivity. We adopt a more aggressive approach to the world, bending it to our use, making it accessible and bringing it within reach. Given these currents in the larger culture and the deep longing for resonance that runs deep in every human being, however tamped down they may be, we who lead and prepare worship week in and week out do well to keep ourselves attentive to resonant possibility inherent in the practice of worship.

We do well to imagine that among those who, on any given Sunday, have made the choice to row against the cultural tide and situate themselves in a worship service, there are many who harbor one burning question—however inarticulate it may be: Is another way of life possible?

One day, I met Stan for coffee at our local café—he had called out of the blue. A mutual friend had put us in touch. Stan was church curious. He had been raised in what he called an a-religious family. He was now a highly successful lawyer in one of the most prestigious law firms in Chicago. Success had been attained but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing from his life. When he talked to his peers about this feeling they suggested a hobby, perhaps therapy would work. In the course of his searching for what that something might be, he began to wonder why people went to church.

We had what I thought was a stimulating conversation. The kind pastors yearn for: a genuine inquirer of the faith! Stan seemed reasonably intrigued by my responses to his stream of questions, but I sensed there was some cognitive dissonance. As we were getting up to leave, overcoming my mainline fear of coming on too strong, I said, "Come and see for yourself. Come and visit on a Sunday morning." He was genuinely surprised that he could just show up, no credentials required. "Maybe," he said, "Not sure I'm ready for that."

More than a few Sundays went by. I began to assume that the truth I had done my best to bear witness to had come off sounding more odd than compelling.

But then, there he was. He slipped in late and took a seat in the back row of the balcony. When the service was over and congregants had emptied out, I noticed Stan lingering in the narthex. As I went over to greet him, he put his hand out, but then drew back—gesturing for me to wait. I realized then he was too emotional to speak. We stood for a while as the tears welled up and flowed. Eventually he found his

voice. I remember him saying, “I’ve never experienced something like that before.” In that instant, I realized how much I had forgotten.

We have arrived at Advent. It is a time to begin again, to hear again, to know again, to be moved again, as if for the first time. We are handling holy things, standing on holy ground, telling an ancient story that reaches us from across the expanse of time and space—at once encompassing the cosmos and calling for us each by name. This story we have received is not simply one we recall—it is one that is inexhaustible in its capacity to re-call us.

It was late in Advent, 1968. Three men were strapped into a capsule atop the most powerful rocket that had ever been built—it would be the rocket’s first manned space flight. The astronauts were piloting a redesigned command module of a spacecraft that had burned up on the launchpad in a tragic accident just a year before. It was a daunting mission. The mission was Apollo 8—some would argue, it was the most important of all the Apollo missions. Before Apollo 8, no human had left earth’s orbit.

For verifiable reasons, NASA engineers were worried that the mission could be a catastrophic failure. Given the mission’s proximity to Christmas, in the event that it *was* a disaster and its crew were literally lost in space, Christmas would forevermore be shrouded in tragedy. Nevertheless, on December 21, 1968, Apollo 8 and its crew blasted off for the moon without incident. The three astronauts were Frank Borman, James Lovell, and Bill Anders.

Eventually, on track and on schedule, and to the great relief of NASA, Apollo 8 made its way into lunar orbit. Its crew became the first humans to orbit the moon.

It was Christmas Eve.

Inside mission control, it was standing room only. In sixty-four countries it was estimated that a billion people—more than a quarter of the world’s population—were glued to televisions and radios. At 8:30 p.m. Houston time, CBS interrupted the Doris Day show and cut to Walter Cronkite and a never-before-seen picture flickered into view.

A small blue orb shone in the upper left part of the screen—likely earth, but viewers didn’t know for sure. Video imaging was blurred. Also, it was the first time earth was being seen from the Moon. Then came the voice of Frank Borman, “This is Apollo 8, coming to you live from the Moon.”

He took a few minutes to explain how they had spent Christmas Eve—taking pictures, doing experiments. Then the astronauts spent time describing the moon. They described its landscape—its mountains, its landmarks and caters.

As the scheduled TV time was winding down, as the spacecraft moved across the Sea of Tranquility, they had one additional unscheduled thing to do before signing off.

Bill Anders spoke up, “We are now approaching lunar sunrise and for all the people back on Earth, the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send you.”

No one in Mission Control, or anyone else—not even the astronauts’ families—had any idea about the content of the message the men were about to deliver.

While the face of the moon continued to move across television screens, without further introduction, Anders began,

“In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness.”

Jim Lovell continued: “And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. And God said, ‘Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.’ And God made the firmament and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.”

Frank Borman picked up from there:

“And God said, ‘Let the waters under the Heaven be gathered together unto one place. And the dry land appear.’ And it was so. And God called the dry land Earth. And the gathering together of the waters He called seas. And God saw that it was good.”

Borman paused, and continued:

“And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, and Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you—all of you on good earth.” A moment later, TV screens around the world went dark.

Inside Mission Control, no one moved.

Then, one after another, these scientists and engineers in Houston began to weep.

The reading had come as a complete surprise.

Back in the studio of CBS, Walter Cronkite fought back tears as he came back on the air.

Such was the surprise of Christmas Eve, 1968.

“In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.”