

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
December 6, 2009
John 14:15-20

“I will come to you...”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

In the book, *The Third Man Factor*, Vincent Lam tells of a winter night when he had an unexpected encounter when he was in a very stressful time in his life—he was trying to get admitted to medical school. Lam’s story spans several weeks when he was studying around the clock and taking a series of daunting exams that covered a huge range of material. Lam felt that he must perform exceptionally well or he would ruin his chances of being admitted to medical school which was the focus of his life. For weeks, Lam did nothing but study, eat, sleep and write exams. Even when he slept, he dreamt of molecular biology and biochemistry, so he never woke refreshed, only anxious to open the books again. Lam developed an almost debilitating tunnel vision about his life, believing that the outcome of the exams would determine the course of his entire future.

One evening after a long day of studying, Lam was exhausted and decided to take a shower. In the shower, Lam sensed a presence. It did not alarm him because he knew immediately that the presence wished to help him. He felt that the presence was a guardian angel sent by God to guide him through this very difficult time. The angel spoke to Lam and gave him advice—specific and practical suggestions about how to conduct his daily life, how to study, and how to manage his emotions. The angel did not promise Lam that he would be admitted to medical school, but told him to have faith.

Lam decided he needed to record the advice given to him by the angel. After the shower he went to his computer and wrote several pages of guidance which he experienced as dictated to him directly by the angel’s voice. Lam saved the document on both his hard drive and a floppy disk and went to bed. The next morning when he went to look for the document he could not find it. He knew he had saved the file in two separate locations, his computer had not crashed, and yet, he could find no trace of the dictation of the angel. Lam writes, “The angel had

departed because I was back on the right track. The rest of my exam period went smoothly. I continued to study intensively and I felt more peaceful doing so. I scored high marks and went on to medical school.”

In 1895, Joshua Slocum was sailing for Gibraltar on the initial leg of his attempt to become the first person to circumnavigate the world alone when his 40 foot sloop, the *Spray*, was struck by a violent squall. To make matters worse, Slocum became suddenly and seriously ill, apparently from food poisoning. Slocum threw himself on the floor in the cabin not far from the wheel. While lying incapacitated on the cabin floor, Slocum was visited by a strange guest who Slocum believes steered the boat through the dangerous storm while he was sick and unable to function. Later he wrote: *I became delirious. When I came to I realized that the sloop was plunging into a heavy sea. Looking out, to my amazement, I saw a tall man at the helm. His rigid hand, grasping the spokes of the wheel, held them as in a vise.*

Before he fell ill, the 51-year-old former navy captain had been experiencing profound loneliness. But in the midst of the severe storm and seriously ill, Slocum was convinced that someone was on board with him and the sense of loneliness left him. Slocum described the other person as a sailor with an “ancient” look about him. Slocum’s initial alarm at encountering the unexpected visitor was allayed by the man, who said to him, “I have come to do you no harm. I have come to aid you. Lie quiet and I will guide your ship tonight.” Enormous waves broke over the *Spray* but Slocum was unworried.

When Slocum recovered and the storm abated, he found the sailboat “still heading as I had left her and going like a racehorse.” The sloop had made 90 miles in the night through rough seas and was still perfectly on course to Gibraltar. Later Slocum wrote: “If ever there was a man at a ship’s wheel, one stood at the wheel of the *Spray* through that livelong night. No thing would be clearer to me than that.” Of the phantom sailor Slocum wrote, “I had the feeling I was in the presence of a friend, a seaman, of vast experience.”

In October 1872, the pioneering American naturalist John Muir found himself stranded halfway up a cliff face on Mount Ritter in the Sierra Nevada. He was spread eagle on this cliff face unable to move up or go down. “My doom appeared fixed,” he later wrote. “I must fall. There would be a moment of bewilderment, and then a lifeless tumble down the precipice to the glacier below.” Just when Muir had given up all hope of being able to move up or down the cliff, he was suddenly possessed of a new power. Something, he said later, “came forward and assumed control...Had I been borne aloft upon wings, my deliverance could not

have been more complete.” That day Muir became the first person to reach the summit of Mount Ritter. He could not explain what had happened to him but later offered as an explanation the presence of a “guardian angel.”

In the book, *The Third Man Factor*, author John Geiger presents dozens of accounts of mountaineers, divers, polar explorers, prisoners of war, shipwreck survivors, aviators, sailors, astronauts and others who survived traumatic, life-threatening events and later told strikingly similar stories of having experienced the close presence of a companion, a helper, or an angel.

The *Third Man Factor* is a gripping read—a book you simply cannot put down. But as a person of faith, I found it unsatisfying that Geiger’s continual search for answers about who or what these guardian angels might be is so inconclusive. Geiger recounts story after story that involve what seem to be a divine presence but he remains stumped as to what could be happening, how this could occur. At one point in the book Geiger writes, “Imagine the impact on our lives if we could learn to access this feeling at will. There could be no loneliness with so constant a companion. There could be no stress in life that we would ever again have to confront alone.”

When I read that line, I wanted to put down the book and yell: I can imagine that! Come visit our Church!!

We are in the season of Advent, a “mini Lent” as I spoke about last Sunday, a time when we wait and prepare for Immanuel, which means God with us. GOD with us. Not God far away, not God in the heavens. No, God here with us.

We are an incarnate faith meaning that we believe some holy being, a prophet, a fully divine and fully human presence came to earth, was born millennia ago.

We are an incarnate faith...which means that we believe Jesus really did once walk on this earth, touch people with his hands, preach on the shoreline, eat with outcasts and endure a painful death.

During Advent we await Immanuel, God with us.

God has come to us. And, what is so important, God continues to come to us.

As we heard in today’s reading from the Book of John, Jesus said,

“I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you.”

I do not know if it was a divine being that appeared to Vincent Lam in the shower and then dictated pages of advice while Lam typed, I do not know if it was a divine being that took the wheel and steered Slocum’s sloop through a storm some 100+

years ago, I do not know if it was a divine being that lifted John Muir and carried him up the face of Mount Ritter in the high Sierras.

What I do know is that when John Geiger writes in his book, “Imagine the impact on our lives if we could learn to access this feeling at will. There could be no loneliness with so constant a companion. There could be no stress in life that we would ever again have to confront alone” I DO know I can imagine the impact. I do know that we can access the feeling that we are not alone. I do know we can eliminate loneliness believing and feeling that we have a constant companion. I do know that there IS no stress in life that we will ever have to confront alone. Geiger writes wistfully about this unimaginable state of grace and I believe it is achievable, it is what Advent is all about. We are awaiting Immanuel, God with us.

Just as we can go to the gym and lift weights and build up our chest, arm, and leg muscles, we can also, through practice, build up our spiritual muscles. It doesn't involve long hours in the gym but it does involve long hours...of prayer and meditation, reading the Bible, and conversing with God. We can, by investing the time and being disciplined, build up our spiritual muscle and then we can experience the presence of God and achieve what Geiger longs for in the Third Man book...no loneliness because we have a constant companion, no stress in life that we will ever have to confront alone.

The Third Man book (named because so many pairs reported feeling that there was a Third Man in their presence) talks about how often **adventurers** experience the third man factor...Geiger write that encounters with the Third Man occur when people are engaged in journeys of endurance in “extreme and unusual environments” or EUE's. Apparently psychologists have coined the tern “EUE” to describe environments that are extreme, pose danger, cause discomfort and are novel. EUE's: extreme and unusual environments.

Most of us won't find ourselves hanging spread eagle on a rock face alone in the high Sierras, most of us won't attempt to circumnavigate the globe in a 40 foot sloop, most of us won't face EUE's like that. But we will face EUE's of our own...the extreme and unusual environments that we will find ourselves in are operating rooms and funeral homes, welfare offices and courtrooms, jail cells and homeless shelters, unemployment lines and battlefields...members of our church family have been in them all. Those are our EUE's—extreme and unusual environments—and we need a companion where we are there.

Jesus or the divine spirit is available to us each day, all the time. But to access, to fully experience that divine presence we must have worked that spiritual muscle, invested the time, talked to that being, prayed in silence, walked alone in the woods, whatever works in your life that helps you feel the presence of and helps you commune with the divine spirit. It takes time and work.

For many years I have been a part of a Clergy Bible Study group that meets weekly. We have an expression in that group that we use to tease one another: *there is no such thing as cheap grace*. Whenever one of us wants to take a short cut, recycle a sermon from years past, slack off, get lazy or complacent, we say to each other: there is no such thing as cheap grace.

Grace does not come easy. A closeness with God, feeling God's presence and fully receiving God's grace is the result of hours of time in quiet meditation, study and prayer getting to know that divine presence well and recognizing that divine presence in all its disguises.

Vincent Lam, Joshua Slocum and John Muir had astounding, fleeting, unexplainable visitations from mysterious beings that appeared, helped and disappeared. Who am I to say who or what those visitors were?

What I can say is that I know a divine presence that offers hope and guidance, comfort and wisdom, love and support is available to us daily and we do not need to be hanging on the edge of a cliff to experience it. However we do need to have practiced and prepared to see, hear, feel and know this presence. As we say to each other in our Clergy Bible Study group, there is no such thing as cheap grace.

We have work to do if we want to see, hear, feel and experience Immanuel, God with us. Jesus has already made a promise, "I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you," we heard read from the *King James Version* of the Bible. "I will not leave you orphaned, I'm coming back" we heard in *The Message*. There's a promise from a trustworthy God.

Jesus has made a promise and so we must do our part. We receive guidance about how to do just that from a 17th century French monk, Brother Lawrence, who wrote *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Listen to Brother Lawrence's words: "I worship God as often as I can...keeping my mind on God's holy presence, and recalling God as often as I find I wander from him. I continue this exercise notwithstanding the difficulties that occur, without troubling myself when my mind wanders involuntarily. Every hour I drive away from my mind everything that is

capable of interrupting my thoughts of God.” Brother Lawrence also wrote that “secret conversations with God must be repeated often throughout the day.” He practiced the presence of God. It is a good practice to emulate.

The challenges we face each day are not due to EUE’s (extreme and unusual environments) that would make headlines or fill books like *The Third Man Factor*. The challenges we face each day come in the form of scary diagnoses, painful losses, unyielding poverty, unrelenting depression, extreme loneliness, and frightening deployments. What I know is that a divine and loving spirit—call Jesus, call it Immanuel, call it a guardian angel—does not need a cliff face or a raging storm at sea to appear before us and be with us. If we have practiced the presence of God, we can experience the presence of God in the emergency room, the cot shelter, the jailhouse, and at 2 AM alone in the dark in our beds. We can experience the presence of Immanuel, God with us, in all places, at all times.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.