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Advent readings inspire Occupy LA arrest

by Jeff Dietrich

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Jeff Dietrich sits in the middle of Occupy LA. (Photo: Jim Ruymen)

COMMENTARY

They came just before dawn; they came with fire trucks and ambulances and sirens blaring; they came in helicopters with rotary blades flapping; they came marching in lock step with helmets and visors and steel batons at "port arms." They came and came and came. They came to disperse, to clean up, and to clear out Occupy LA. The morning air was cold and I was shivering not from the cold but from fear. Small drops of sweat trickled down my armpits. This was the last place I wanted to be. At age 65 I was in the distinct minority of this ragtag assembly of youthful rabble-rousers, an alien in this collection of seemingly disorganized children.

I had not planned on coming here but someone stood up at church on Sunday and pleaded with the congregation to join him at 12:01 a.m., the police deadline for dispersal of the LA Occupiers of City Hall Plaza. The readings for that Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, were from the Gospel of Mark: "Stay awake, don't fall asleep for you do not know the hour or the time of the master's return! I say to you what I say to all, stay awake!" It occurred to me at that moment, like a flash of lightning: Where are people staying awake? Where are people not sleeping? Where are people keeping vigil? Certainly not in this church and mostly not in any church for that matter. The readings have nothing to do with keeping vigil in quiet candlelit spaces of sacred sanctuaries. The readings are about being awake to the historical moment; the readings are about discerning the movement of the spirit in the present.

If we are not awake we will miss this moment because it's not going to look like what we think it should

look like. Theologians call it the "Parousia" -- most of us don't know what that means. It is a Greek word for the second coming of God's kingdom, which is what Advent is all about. And we should remember that almost no one in the Gospel stories was actually awake for the first coming because it did not look like what they thought it should look like.

So I raised my hand in church, because I realized that at 12:01 a.m. my only plans were to be asleep, and said, "Can I come with you and keep vigil?" No one else in the church volunteered. The in-breaking of God's kingdom is always shrouded in mystery because we're mostly asleep and when we are asleep everything seems mysterious.

You have to be awake to the historical moment and maybe a little crazy to think that this coalition of the unwashed, the raffish, the punks, the anarchists, the dope smokers, the tree sitters, the dumpster divers, and the aggressive cyclists might actually constitute the Parousia, what Christians know as the in-breaking of God's Kingdom on earth. It's more like the Children's Crusade, doomed to failure. But you have to ask yourself: Where else are the important issues of the day being exposed and proclaimed? Where else are people publically standing up for and demanding economic justice? Where else is the earth being defended? Where else are the corporations and the bankers and the Wall Street thieves being publically unmasked?

I wish I did not feel like an overaged alien in their midst. I wish they were a more reputable, more articulate, and well-behaved group. I wish they didn't smoke dope and party so much. I wish I felt more comfortable in their midst. I wish they looked a little bit more like church people.

But here's the thing, they are there and they are awake, and they are keeping public vigil, and if this isn't the Parousia, if this isn't what Christians are supposed to be awaiting during this season of Advent, it's a reasonable approximation. I think of Martin Luther, who said at the Wittenberg door, "Here I stand," because sometimes there is just nowhere else to stand and you have to stand somewhere.

So I am standing here at 5 a.m. and I am shivering with cold and fear, holding a banner and facing off against 350 members of the Los Angeles Police Department and I am wondering what pepper spray or tear gas might feel like; I am wondering what kind of damage those steel batons can do to skulls and ribs and clavicles and tibias.

I am surrounded by unruly and unlikely allies, comrades and companions in the struggle, while across the street, behind the police lines, there is a score of media trucks keeping watch. The whole world is watching. The whole world is watching as the dawn breaks red and purple against the sky and the entire line of police is ordered to step back five paces.

At the applause and gratitude of this unruly crowd the police retreat in orderly fashion, and victory, however provisionally, is declared. Victory is declared by those who have stayed up all night, by those who have kept watch, by those who already can see what no one else can see, that the Parousia, the kingdom of justice and compassion, is just below the horizon, with the dawn it is about to break in.

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We just have to keep watch and stay awake.

(Dietrich present at Occupy LA, Nov. 28 -30. Photos by Jim Ruymen.)

[Jeff Dietrich has been a member of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker House since 1970. He wrote this essay Nov. 28 in the aftermath of what was to be the police shutdown of Occupy LA. The shutdown occurred two days later in the early morning of Nov. 30 and Dietrich was arrested for civil disobedience. He was just released from the Los Angeles County Jail. His book, *Broken and Shared: Food, Dignity, and the Poor on Los Angeles' Skid Row* will be published Dec.11, 2011.]

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