

Bible Study: Advent I (B) - November 29, 2020

Old Testament: Isaiah 64:1-9

Waiting is the hardest thing to do because it feels like you're not doing anything.. Virtually the only things we haven't been able to speed up or shorten are our basic biological processes. It still takes nine long months to have a baby, whether we want to wait that long or not. And so, if we want to be with Mary in her journey toward giving birth to Jesus, we need to settle into the long haul. Now in her last month of pregnancy, we're just going to have to take these four weeks of Advent and wait.

Our scripture from Isaiah today has an interesting take on waiting. The writer is marveling at how different the God of Israel is from the other gods in the cultures of the time. And then the writer remembers, "When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him."

The prophet is surprised not just by the mighty deeds like earthquakes – the writer is equally stunned that here is a God who works for the people, and the people for whom God works are the people who wait for God.

2020 has been nothing but a year of waiting. Perhaps we are better equipped now than we ever have been to understand the oft-repeated Biblical mandate to wait upon the Lord. The Good News shared with us today is that God is working for us as we wait for God.

But we're doing another kind of waiting. We're waiting for the signs of the Incarnation in our own lives. We're waiting to see the new and next way that God will be manifest in our own individual time and place. God is with us, but where and how?

What has been blossoming and growing in your heart during this time of waiting? What new thing is ready to be born in your spiritual community after having been forced to slow down and really ask what is most important about church? How has your family found new strengths and graces by the call to adapt and the sudden multiplication of time together and new challenges with school and work?

As you reflect on your waiting this year, what has God grown in you? What will be the gift you offer the world this Christmas as Mary did? It takes awake and alert eyes to see the grace even amid the suffering we've endured.

There is peace and comfort in the truth that as the endless days of waiting crawl by, God is active within us and our communities. Isaiah tells us in our scripture today, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." We are God's work of art, being painstakingly shaped into the vessel of incarnation that will bring the presence of Christ to the world. You are a masterwork. And a masterwork takes time.

And Isaiah, the great prophet of the Advent season, announces the Good News: "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Psalm 80: 1-7,16-18

Psalm 80 recognizes several things about the relationship between Israel and God. First, it recognizes God's sovereignty and role in the lives of the Jewish people – God is a shepherd leading a flock.

Second, that flock has become wayward – and they are suffering under the burden of their waywardness. In this psalm, the people of Israel – as a worshipping community – recognize that they have fallen out of right relationship with God, and suffering under this burden, look to be drawn back into the fold of God their Shepherd. There is an urgency in the psalm, a desire to be again – and immediately – under the care and direction of God.

Verses 7 and 19 serve as a refrain and express the longing of the psalm's writer: "Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved." The writer of the psalm recognizes that it is in the capacity and graciousness of God to be forgiving – to offer restoration to all who seek God's face. In the face of our own sinfulness, and our own wanderings from the fold of the Shepherd, God is always there, beckoning us back, offering restoration and salvation for all who seek God.

- How will you seek to find the face of God?
- In what ways is the psalm speaking to you, your church and your community?

Epistle: I Corinthians 1:3-9

We often take for granted that the letters of Paul are actually letters. When we hear them read in church, or in private devotions, we often lose the fact that Paul was writing a letter – opening up a dialogue – with a specific people, in a specific church, in specific region, time and context. The First Letter to the Corinthians is no different. Paul was writing to the Corinthians about certain aspects of their church – problems that they faced in their own, Roman, metropolitan context.

The reading today comes from a section of Paul's letter known as the "thanksgiving." It was typical – and rhetorically expected – that first-century letters would begin with a salutation and thanksgiving, usually to a Roman deity. However, Raymond F. Collins, in his analysis "First Corinthians" (Liturgical Press, 1999), points out that Paul subverts this tradition by appealing to the work that Christ is doing, and has done, in the midst of the Corinthian church. In this letter, the thanksgiving has a very eschatological edge – meaning that Paul is looking forward, too, and reminding the Corinthians of the promise of the return of Christ. This foreshadows themes found later in the letter.

Twice in the thanksgiving (vv. 7, 8) Paul reminds the Corinthians of the promise that Jesus would return. Paul's sentiment has the air of a Markean immediacy – as if Paul is convinced that Jesus could return at any moment. It is easy, when the Bible speaks of the return of Christ, to get lost in the uncertainty and mythos surrounding this item of faith.

However, Paul is clear about what this expectation should do for us, as Christians: exercise and hone one's spiritual gifts, and work to be blameless. This is not a call for the Corinthians to work harder; Paul's exhortation is matched by his belief that "God is faithful." Paul reminds us that it is God who called us through the revelation and person of Jesus Christ. In this way, God will not forget or abandon us; God is preparing us, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to be prepared and blameless before the reign of God is fully realized on earth. Paul is calling the Corinthians, and us, to work toward the ends of the Kingdom of God – undergirded by the faithfulness of God through the life and revelation of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.

- What are your spiritual gifts?
- Which ones would you like to hone and improve?
- How are you working toward the reality of the Kingdom of God in your church and community?
- How is the Holy Spirit working in those places, and how can you participate in that work?

Gospel: Mark 13:24-37

The readings for the First Sunday of Advent are a reminder of the constant cycle of sin and redemption that we, as humans and as believers, are party to. We strive for righteousness, fall short, beg God for assistance, are lifted back up, and then fall down again. It is only through Jesus' grace that we achieve righteousness.

We close out today's readings with a meditation on the end times: Sun darkening, no light from the moon, stars falling from the sky, the very powers of heaven shaken. These do not sound like good times. What's more is that these do not sound like particularly appropriate messages for Christmas! Whose idea was this? Didn't we get enough penance in Isaiah and today's psalm? Where is our happy, hopeful, celebratory message to get us ready for the next four weeks?

Well, we should always be a little unsettled about the prospect of Jesus' return. Just as Jesus' birth was unsettling in his time; being born to an unmarried couple, far from home, into a politically volatile world that he was destined to destabilize. Perhaps this reading encourages us to consider a new way celebrate Christmas? Instead of hymns and presents, maybe it should be about considering whether we are ready for Jesus?

Instead of celebrating the birth of the Savior, maybe we should take the opportunity to question whether we are really living up to the life that same Savior has called us to?

Rather than giving thanks for all the wonderful things Jesus has given to our world, perhaps we should take a second look at Mark's words here and remember that Jesus is the master of his House. It is his world; are we really doing all we need to do to keep it up, so that we are ready for his return?