

1st Sunday of Advent (November 27, 2011)

Hope is Born

“Wait and Hope”

[Text: Isaiah 64:1-9](#)

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Our text for this first Sunday of Advent is part of a much larger lament; a psalm in which the speaker defines a crisis and cries out to God for help. The context for the prophet’s prayer is when God’s people returned to the Promised Land, to Jerusalem following their almost fifty years of forced exile in Babylon. They had weathered alienation from their homes, life in a foreign land, suffering for their sins, and feeling abandoned by God. Now they were home freed from their captivity by Cyrus the Persian king.

Once home they found nothing but devastation: the city walls were gone, their homes destroyed, and worst of all, the temple, the physical sign of God’s presence, was nothing more than a burned out ruin. It’s like what the residents of Joplin, Missouri found as they crawled out of their basements on Sunday, May 22nd after the F-5 tornado roared through their city or the residents of Texas hill country found after the raging wildfires of this past summer.

On behalf of God’s people Isaiah cried out: **“God, rip open the heavens and get down here! Make the mountains shake like you did at Sinai when you gave the commandments! Just as fire makes a brush heap burn and water boil – come reveal yourself so that everyone can see you! No one has ever seen or heard a God who acts on behalf of those who wait!”**

Isaiah remembered the stories of how God had shown up in the past in game-changing ways: leading God’s people out of Egypt; feeding the desert wanderers with bread from heaven; giving their enemies into their hands so they could inhabit the Promised Land. But it had been a long time since anyone had seen God do mighty works. And now the prophet is painfully aware that the people’s sins have further alienated them from God and that perhaps it is possible the people’s sin was caused by God’s hiding God’s self from them. And, an even more disheartening thought was that perhaps the people sinned because God hid from them.

Like our ancestors in the faith, we, here this morning, this nation and the peoples of the world can identify with Isaiah’s cry: **“Where are you, God? Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me.”** (Is 63:15) We too come to God acknowledging our helplessness and need. As one commentator said, “(we are) vulnerable to forces that may destroy our happiness – indeed, our very existence – but there is little or nothing that we, when left to ourselves, are capable of doing about our precarious state.” (“Texts for Preaching, Year B, p 4)

We too, like the prophet cry out, “God, do something about this world! We can’t handle it anymore. Come and fix it, NOW!” When we begin to highlight the distress of the world we can

start in the economic world and our own 2008 meltdown fueled by the greed of way too many. Now the super committee has proven to be a super failure!

The Middle East is a tinder box awaiting the match: Egypt, Syria, and Yemen are in the middle of daily internal violent confrontations; Israel and the Palestinians cannot find a way to peaceful negotiations; the horn of Africa is smoldering with internal conflict; and while our involvement in Iraq is drawing down, the sectarian violence increases. And, what a mess in Pakistan and Afghanistan!

Closer to home the political infighting only get worse; there is little civility left in public discourse. Almost twenty years ago Scott Peck in his book “A World Waiting to Be Born” wrote, “There is an illness abroad in the land...We are in need of healing.” He was talking about incivility. (p 3, 6) The illness is even worse today. We are not healed

The incidence of violence continues to climb including Black Friday near riots, pepper sprayings and shootings at WALMARTS. The gap between the rich and the poor broadens in our suburbs as it does across the country. To top it off, there are the constant personal crises manifest as unemployment, and marital and family dysfunction.

And then we remember the prophet’s words that no eye has seen or ear heard of any God besides God Almighty, Creator and Redeemer, who works for those who wait for him. “Wait for him”, that’s what Advent is all about. Advent is not about Christmas; we are not yet singing Christmas carols. It is not about developing the discipline of waiting to open presents. We wait, but waiting is mostly passive, like when we are in a line waiting our turn. Sometimes we wait for a verdict, a decision, or even worse, a diagnosis. That kind of waiting is filled with anxiety. We also wait for pain, death – the prick of the needle, the separation, the last heartbeat. We wait with dread and fear.” (Abingdon Preacher’s Annual, Bergland, p 372)

We wait once again to celebrate the birth of Jesus. But we also want God to come down here and do something. As Frederick Buechner wrote: “To wait at Advent is to above all else act in Christ’s stead as fully as we know how. To wait for Christ is to be as best we can Christ to those who need us to be Christ to them most and to bring them the most we have of Christ’s healing and hope because unless we bring it, it may never be brought at all...” (“Secrets in the Dark”, Buechner, p284)

An Advent waiting is a waiting filled with hope that God will act on behalf of God’s people. It is waiting with the expectation that God will remember, as Isaiah prayed, “**Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.**” Eugene Peterson said that such “...hoping is not dreaming. It is not spinning an illusion of fantasy to protect us from our boredom or our pain.” It means a confident alert expectation that God will do what God said God will do. It is imagination put in the harness of faith. It is a willingness to let God do it God’s way and in God’s time. (“Living the Message”, Peterson, p 57)

Henri Nouwen reminds us optimism and hope are radically different attitudes. “Optimism is the expectation that things – the weather, human relationships, the economy, the political

situation – will get better. Hope is the trust that God will fulfill God’s promises to us in a way that leads us to true freedom...” All the great spiritual leaders in history were people of hope: Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Mary, Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela. They all lived with a promise in their hearts that guided them toward the future without the need to know exactly what it would look like. Let’s live with hope. (Bread for the Journey, Nouwen, p Jan. 16)

Let’s make this year’s Advent not so much a waiting to get to Christmas morning and the gifts but a time in which hope is born; waiting with anticipation and grace, for God’s hope to be born in us. The Gospel lesson for the 1st Sunday of Advent this year is Mark’s account of the Christ’s Second Coming and he challenges his readers to “...keep alert...keep awake...again I say to all: keep awake.”

Look for the signs of God’s coming today. God is here with us now. One such sign is the table to which Christ invites us. He is here. Amen.