

“Impatient waiting”

November 27, 2011

Text: *Isaiah 64,1-9, Mark 13:24-37*

I.

On this first Sunday of Advent, there’s an energy building. We’ve already had our Thanksgiving meal with family and friends and, by now, we are aware that the holiday season is upon us.

That should be good news. However, as we think about these next few weeks, leading up to Christmas, my guess is—for many of us—our calendars are already full.

Okay, let me just put it out there: *How many of us, once again, have taken on too much?* Well enough, but If we’re not careful, the season will pass us by without us having the time to breath deeply and enjoy it.

Because, hey, we have much to do, don’t we?

- Christmas greetings to send out ...
- Shopping to do, although—believe it or not—some of us may already have finished our shopping. Don’t you just love those people? They are so organized ... always planning ahead, working ahead. They have figured it out because things can get hectic.
- With Christmas parties to attend ... at work ... with families ... in our neighborhoods ... with our church.

The point is: it’s important to make sensible decisions so we don’t stress ourselves out by simply taking on too much.

Advent is a time of waiting; as Christians, however, we’re not waiting in a vacuum. We’re waiting in the context of a particular story. As both our scripture readings attest this morning—from **Isaiah 64** and **Mark 13**—we wait expectantly, with anticipation, for God to come.

1. With **Isaiah**, we wait for God to come in the *restoration* (more on that in just a moment).
2. With **Mark**, in this section of scripture known as *the little apocalypse* (apocalypse referring to the final consummation of creation), the *waiting* is for Jesus’ return. The scripture points to a time *after* Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection. It points to a new day of God’s coming—God’s coming again in the risen Christ.

And of course, both of these scriptures help to get us ready for the *waiting* at Christmas—for the birth of the Christ child.

II.

But this *waiting* isn't always easy for us, is it? And sometimes we feel like the prophet Isaiah in our reading from **Isaiah 64**:

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ...
So that the mountains would quake in your presence ...
And to make your name known to our adversaries ...
So that they might tremble in your presence.*

Sometimes, we don't feel like waiting. We get impatient, eager for things to happen.

This reading from **Isaiah 64** is from the prophetic activity of **Third Isaiah**, during the period known as *the Restoration*. This was the time after the Israelites' return from Babylonian exile to their homeland of Judah ... and to Jerusalem. Not all of the Israelites went back, of course. But many of them did ... a few thousand or so, most likely.

However, this was a very difficult time for Israel. Things were complicated.

How would they be able to go home again after some fifty years in exile? And remember that many had died in Babylon. And many others had been born there and knew nothing of their homeland. Again, we cannot forget that they had lost everything. Jerusalem had been burned, the temple destroyed and their King, along with all of the elites, had been deported.

And so, this experience of *restoration* wasn't easy. Everything had changed. There was a totally different community living in Judah and in Jerusalem—the off spring of the lower classes that had not been deported, no doubt ... along with other people who had moved into the area.

There was much to contend with in this *restoration* process: poverty ... destruction ... corruption. And with the return of the upper class, how were they going to sort out land rights ... and power arrangements?

How were they going to go about rebuilding the city walls of Jerusalem, for example, and the temple? Who was going to be in charge. How was this going to be paid for? And how were they going to govern themselves?

In the throes of trying to work all of this out, many were frustrated. There was a lot of uncertainty about what the future would hold.

And for his part, the prophet **Isaiah** was eager to be a faithful and useful voice in helping his people work their way through this difficult time. He's filled with passion and zeal for his people and for their life and for their future. Understandably, he didn't want to disappoint his people; and he didn't want to disappoint God.

And so, we can understand his anxiety and frustration, to the point where he cried out:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, O GOD ... so that the mountains would quake in your presence ... come down, and to make your name known among your adversaries.

O God, you are our Father, we are the clay and you are the potter; we are the work of your hand ... we are all your people.

With great passion and conviction, **Isaiah** spoke these words. Again, it was a difficult time—trying to find the right leaders and agreeing on a way forward. Sound familiar??

III.

If we think about it, how could **Isaiah** NOT be impatient, waiting for things to sort out ... waiting for enlightened leadership to rise to the moment? Waiting ... waiting ... waiting.

But **Isaiah** was also impatient with God. In our contemporary world—some 2,500 years later—it's hard for us to grasp the depths of the strained relationship Israel has with God around the Exile. Israel believed that all the destruction and the Exile were God's will in response to Israel's disobedience and sinful violation of covenant. In other words, God has punished Israel. Israel believed that.

However, from Israel's point of view, by now, some sixty to seventy years later—after all the incredible suffering—Israel understands what happened to her. She's *got it*. She has confessed her sin and is eager, now—as she has been for years—for a redemption that can open up the future once again.

Thus, the lament of the prophet, *O God that you would tear open the heavens and come down*. In other words, *where have you been, God?*

IV.

1. Aren't there times in our lives, friends, when we long to have God come into our lives—into our minds, hearts and spirits—to make the crooked straight, to make the unjust just and the unfair fair?
2. Aren't there times when we want so badly for God to bring healing to us and to our loved ones? Times when we pray so fervently for healing and wholeness ... for renewal and restoration?

And don't we get frustrated during those periods when God seems so distant, so removed from our lives and from our deprivations and sufferings? O God, we think, *tear open the heavens and come down*.

That's the human experience. It's human to want God to be involved in our lives, and for God to reveal God's self in ways that convince us that God is present.

We want to know that God cares and that God's guiding hand is upon us. And when we don't sense God's presence, or we're perhaps not aware of it, we get frustrated don't we? And we get impatient.

Impatient waiting.

In the history of our evolving faith, there must have been times—before Jesus' birth—when the *waiting community* waited with a growing impatience. The prophets had spoken of a Messiah. But when would this Messiah come?

How long, Lord, how long?

Impatience isn't always a bad thing. There are positive qualities to impatience. For example,

- our impatience can energize us.
- It can help us focus on the causes of our frustration.
- Our impatience may be a part of our caring so very deeply ... and of our eagerness for change and renewal.

And so, this Advent season, we wait—and not always patiently. But that's okay. Because, our waiting is tied to our hope ... and we hope with fervid passion and zeal.

This HOPE is the essence of the season—HOPE that leads to the *new life* that breaks through at Bethlehem.

V.

In 1945, on the shoulders of the great **World War**, *Ruth Krauss* wrote a children's book entitled *The Carrot Seed*. Although only a brief book, it has a profound message.

Very simply, a little boy plants a *carrot seed*. Then, he tends to the weeds and is careful to water the ground every day. However, although his parents and brother want to be supportive, they are not very optimistic. Still, the little boy persists, tending to the planting and watering the ground. His family remains dubious.

Then one day—CHECK IT OUT: A carrot breaks through the earth, reaching for the sunlight, just as the little boy had thought it would. The carrot, you see, is a symbol of the life that God gives; it is larger than the little boy and his family.

Friends, it is this life—the life in the *carrot seed*—that Advent points to. It is this life that comes to us in a manger at Bethlehem. It is this life that gives light to the world and to human hearts everywhere. And we are messengers for this light to be transmitted.

Come, O Holy One, come. *Tear open the heavens and come down.* Come to us, in our impatient waiting, that we might know once again the warmth and reassurance of your presence.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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