

Sunday December 3rd, 2017

Advent I

PRAYER: O God, we know that in times past, we looked for you in heavenly eclipses, movement of stars and wonders of the skies. We listened for you in howling winds and learned of you in the quaking of mountains.

But now we know that you will be found among us. And you will be seen not in the glitter of a mall but in a shelter for the homeless. You will be heard not in the pitch of a commercial but in the whimper of a child. You will come, not clothed in the comforts of the privileged but swaddled in the needs of the neglected.

Open our eyes in this Advent season that we might witness the appearance of the angels. Open our ears that we might hear the testimony of the shepherds. Open our hearts that we might ponder the secrets of Mary. And open our mouths that we might shout the good news of the coming of the Lord!

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: Hear the words of the Apostle Paul when he writes: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into fellowship of God’s Son, Jesus Christ,” By God’s grace you will be sustained to the end, and through Christ’s mercy you will be found guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. To God be all praise and glory.

STEWARDSHIP: God’s truth is unchanging, his promises are eternal, and his benevolent care spans the ages. We come with our gifts to be molded in accordance to God’s purposes. We offer ourselves to be shaped by God’s will. May he fill us wisdom, and make us vessels of truth. May all that we do be an outpouring of God’s goodness, spreading compassion on the afflicted and care on all who may be in need.

PASTORAL PRAYER: On this first Sunday of Advent, memories of Christmases past flood our souls. We recall the first time we heard the stories—the journey of Mary and Joseph, the praise of the shepherds, the music of the angels, and the lure of the star. These stories had an earthly ring, but they sounded a heavenly anthem. The words were spoken in human tongues, but they proclaimed a divine visitation. And like shepherds, we praised you for revealing yourself in a manger.

Surprise us again, O Lord, as you surprised us in those days. Let this Christmas come to us, as that first Christmas came to the shepherds, and we will echo their song of thanksgiving in the name of Jesus.

We do not make this request as servants who are worthy of praise, but as defendants deserving rebuke. We never seem to weary of repeating the mistakes of our ancestors. When our prayers go unanswered, our eyes accuse not ourselves but you. And when our plans go awry, our hearts indict not our ambitious pride but your cold indifference. Yet we stand before you with confidence, O God, assured that you begin the search for us before we begin the search for you.

By this knowledge we are moved to humility. It pains us to ponder the take-for-granted attitude with which we accept your compassion and embrace your promise. We have become as casual about the gift of Christ as we have about the gifts of Santa Clause. Deliver us from the temptation to let this Christmas be just another Christmas.

As we depart for Bethlehem, let us contemplate the one whom we shall meet there—not a doting grandparent bearing gifts for the spoiled but the helpless baby seeking comfort from the sensitive.

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Let us not become so confident in our work of preparation that we close the door against the possibility of surprise, for you never enter our world without surprising us. Israel's leaders foresaw your coming in clashing swords, but your invasion of earth is heralded by the gurgle of an infant.

So, we pray that, as we wait your coming this year, we shall do so with hearts yielded and minds chastened. Prepare us for a holy surprise. If you happen to arrive at some other hour than eleven o'clock, or some other day than Sunday, let us listened closely for your song of approach. And if you appear not in our sanctuary but in the shelter for the homeless, let us hasten to the site of your visitation.

When you came into Nazareth of Galilee, it was merely to comfort but also to command, not solely to bless but also to judge, not only to serve but also to rule. Even so, Lord Jesus, enter our world again. Surprise us as only God can-that through you, we may come to God as, in you, God comes to us.

BENEDICTION: We journey toward Bethlehem, O God, where you will reveal the glory of heaven and the hope of earth. May the light of your glory brighten our path to the future, and may the brilliance of your hope beckon us to new beginnings. Amen.

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Christmas in the Old Testament

Isaiah 64:1-9

“Throwing Away the Filthy Rages.”

I am not sure why, except maybe because we are drawing closer to Christmas or perhaps because of Laura’s family reunion a couple of weeks ago, where her uncles and aunts and many of her first cousins were in the same room for the first time in many years, but I am feeling a bit nostalgic. In particular as I was looking at pictures of Laura’s family at the reunion and I began thinking about grandmothers and grandfathers.

I was thinking about grandparents in general, but particularly my own two grandmothers, from whom I experienced many years of love and support. Shirley Maguire and Gertrude Rich were two special women. In fact, I have had the privilege of actually having four grandmothers, because when Laura and I got married, not only were all four of my grandparents at the wedding, but three of Laura’s grandparents as well.

Grandmothers are special people, and it is a rare thing to find someone who did not adore their grandmothers, if they were privileged to know them. I found a few thoughts about grandmothers; I wish to share with you today. The first comes from the late author Erma Bombeck who wrote, “A grandmother will put a sweater on you when she feels cold, feed you when she is hungry, and put you to bed when she is tired.”

Lois Wyse wrote, “A mother becomes a true grandmother the day she stops noticing the terrible things her children do, because she is so enchanted with the wonderful things her grandchildren do.” Humourist Dave Barry wrote, “You feel completely comfortable entrusting your baby to [grandparents] for long periods, which is why most grandparents flee to Florida at the earliest opportunity.”

Spend any time as a pastor of any congregation; you soon discover that no one is prouder of anyone, than a grandmother is of her grandchildren. They have conveniently forgotten the wet diapers, and hard work associated with bringing up a baby. All they notice is how many steps their little darlings can take, the cute words of wisdom that comes from the mouths of the little angels; and how many times the sweet little things kissed grandma on her last visit.

Myron Cohen said, “Last week while walking through the park, I met a neighbour who was taking her two grandsons for a walk. I waved to her and said, “You have nice looking grandchildren, Mrs. Brown. How old are they?” Smiling proudly, she said, “The lawyer is four and the doctor is six.” Clearly, grandmothers may also be known for their overabundance of confidence in their grandchildren.

I believe that grandchildren are also walking demonstrations of hope for the future. No matter how rough grandparents have had it in life, they always hope for something better for their grandchildren. Holding a grandchild’s hand is like holding faith in the future. That brings me to the point that the season of Advent, among other things, is always a season of expectant hope.

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The scriptures, the decorations, the music, and the celebrations: all call us to expect something better. The prophet Isaiah was a man of expectant hope; a hope, which, frankly, is rather surprising, given the circumstances of his life and ministry. By the time Isaiah pens this passage in chapter 64, there is little left for Israel to be hopeful about. Jerusalem is destroyed. Many Jews are now off in exile, and Israel's enemies are gloating.

The sad part for Isaiah is that he knows it didn't have to be this way. The people of Israel brought this tragedy on themselves by disobeying and ignoring God. When Isaiah calls on God to "come down", he is acknowledging that had Israel remained faithful, God would have left his presence fully among his people. The call to God, to come down, is really a call to God to make a difference, to change things.

Isaiah sees the present circumstance as intolerable, if only God would come. "O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel." The name Emmanuel, of course, means "God with us". Isaiah acknowledges that God's coming, affects everything from enemies experiencing God's wrath, to the very mountains trembling. God's coming will be beyond all our expectations, even though God has no reason to care for us.

Isaiah recognizes that God welcomes people who do right, but as we are all well aware, none of us does things right 100% of the time. If therefore, we need God to transform our lives, but God only welcomes those who do right; how can we be saved? Isaiah recognizes that sin is not just a bad action, but it is rather a condition of our lives. In fact, to drive the point home, Isaiah gives us a very detailed description of sin.

In the passage today, Isaiah states that sin makes us unclean. The word he uses here for unclean is the very same word mentioned in Leviticus 13:45 as the word lepers were to shout as they journeyed. To avoid contact with others they were commanded by Moses to shout "Unclean!" as a warning for healthy people to steer clear of them. As sinful people therefore, Isaiah claims we are dangerous to others.

Sin is also, according to Isaiah demonstrating in thinking we are somehow righteous. Meaning that we somehow feel the tasks we do in this world are godly. In other words, the sin is evidenced in believing we can somehow save ourselves by our works. Isaiah states that our righteous deeds are but "filthy rags". Now I need to be careful here in telling you the literal and cultural translation of filthy rags.

In Hebrew it means menstrual clothes. In Isaiah's day a woman, having her period, wore certain clothes to let everyone know she was unclean. The cultural taboos of contact with blood, still followed by orthodox Jews and many Muslims, demonstrated more clearly in the story of the Good Samaritan, meant that in Mosaic law, a woman was defiled during her period. Isaiah states that our righteous deeds are like those clothes. No matter what we do, we are still defiled and that applies to both men and women, I should make clear.

Isaiah goes on to say that sin is like a faded and dried up leaf. He means that sin carried with it the signs of death and decay, just like a fallen leaf is dead and eventually decays.

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Finally, Isaiah makes the point that the condition of sin is demonstrated by a disinterest in God. God is neither an object of worship, nor a source of one's strength. To sum up then; a sinful life without God is a life marked by death and decay. Isaiah acknowledges that our only hope is for our creator, the potter, as he describes God, to take us back and remold us into the people we can be and should be. God is the source of our hope, but now the hard part enters the picture.

In acknowledging that God is the source of our hope, Isaiah also is well aware that one thing is required of us; patience. In calling urgently to God, Isaiah is demonstrating the struggle we all have in waiting; waiting on the Lord. The season of Advent, besides being a season of hope, is also a season of waiting; a season of expectant waiting. Advent is the season when we are called to watch for God's deliverance.

We know we need God's salvation; that point is very clear, but waiting for that salvation to come to full fruition is very difficult. Our modern life is one hardly marked by patience. We all like to be at the front of the line, first for service and just hate bidding our time while others putter along ahead of us. I know my discomfort at waiting. I get so irritated at the grocery store, behind another customer, who in my mind is not prepared.

The clerk checks out the groceries, asks if the customer wants any bags, or collects reward points, then gives the total. It isn't until this moment that many people finally open their wallet or purse to get out their money or debit card. Then, horrors of horrors, is the person who decides to pay with a bag full of change, or forgets a certain item and leaves us all waiting while then run to the other end of the store for eggs or whatever.

We absolutely hate waiting. Isaiah hated waiting. Israel hated waiting. But we especially don't like waiting for God to act. It's very hard to wait on God. I came across something this past week about waiting that really spoke to me. In *One Inch From the Fence*, Wes Seeliger writes,

I have spent long hours in the intensive care waiting room...watching with anguish people...listening to urgent questions: Will my husband make it? Will my child walk again? How do you live without your companion of thirty years? The intensive care waiting room is different from any place in the world. And the people who wait are different. They can't do enough for each other. No one is rude. The distinctions of race and class melt away.

A person is a father first, a black man second. The garbage man loves his wife as much as the university professor loves his, and everyone understands this. Each person pulls for everyone else. In the intensive care waiting room, the world changes. Vanity and pretense vanish. The universe is focused on the next doctor's next report. If only it will show improvement. Everyone knows that loving someone else is what life is all about.

Dare I suggest that the season of Advent is kind of like being in the intensive care waiting room? We are all in the same situation, desperately hoping for the best. All longing for the Great Physician to walk through the door, telling us everything is going to be alright.

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Part of the good news in all this waiting is that just like an intensive care waiting room, we do not have to wait alone. We have each other to lean on. When waiting on the Lord, all the pretense and things that separate people no longer matter. In Isaiah's day, kings and paupers both looked for the Lord to come. In our day, we all join together to wait, knowing full well, that if this world is ever going to improve we need God to intervene.

The season of Advent, as we know, reminds us that God's intervention has already begun. With the birth of Christ, the Kingdom of God was ushered into this world. Yet, we also know the process of full redemption of this world is not yet complete. The Apostle Paul captures our struggle well in Romans 8 when he writes,

Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will give us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for the future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, everything on earth was subjected to God's curse. All of creation anticipates the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (Vv. 18-22)

Can we not hear the anguish of the world in its longing and waiting for redemption? Every broken heart, every shattered relationship, every act of injustice, or every grievous act of inhumanity is all labour pains. Now that I think about it, maybe the waiting room we are in isn't an intensive care waiting room but a birthing waiting room. I know things are different now as I and most fathers are in the delivery room, but when I was born my father had to wait in another room, for word of my arrival.

For thousands of generations, fathers were asked to wait outside the tent, the room, the delivery room while the midwife, doctors and nurses delivered the baby. So, I wonder, what was worse, the waiting or the delivering? I came across a funny story about a man who was a young father-to-be and was pacing back and forth, wringing his hands in the waiting room, while his wife was in labour.

He was clearly tied up in knots from fear and anxiety. Beads of perspiration dripped from his brow. Finally, at 4:00 A.M. a nurse popped out of the delivery room door and said, "Congratulations, sir, you have a little girl!" The young father breathed a huge sigh of relief as he collapsed into a chair. He finally looked up at the nurse and said, "Oh, how I thank God it's a girl. She'll never have to go through the awful agony I've had tonight.

Yes, ladies I know, there is no comparison between what we fathers claim to endure, and what you endured in the delivery room. The point being made by Isaiah and the Apostle Paul is that in waiting for Lord, we all struggle. Like the young father we experience: anxiety, doubt, wringing of hands and every other stress indicator we can think of. How long, O Lord, must we wait? How long must we endure the struggles of this world?

Waiting is so hard. That is what Advent is all about; remembering the waiting of people of God for Jesus' first coming, and learning to wait for his second appearing.

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And it also means doing so with hope. You might be wondering, right about now, how we do this waiting when the wait of reality crushes in on us. Well I have been expressing it quite a bit of late the answer to this query but let me approach it a different way. My Pastoral Ministry professor Dr. Ken Jackson once gave a simple scenario and then asked a profound question.

Let us suppose that we all lived in a village, where we all made our living by fishing in the seas from little one-person boats. One day while heading out to fish, you happen to come across one of your fellow villagers, trapped up on a rock ledge, in his boat. It seems that as he or she was fishing they didn't notice that the tide was going out and now they were trapped on the rocks.

The question Dr. Jackson asked was this, "What therefore is the caring, Christian or pastoral thing to do when you come across your neighbour left high and dry on the rocks. In our class, the suggestion was made right off that we try and pull him off the rocks. It seems like a reasonable response; however, in pulling the boat off the rocks we likely will damage it, and cause it to leak and sink.

We made some other suggestions, each full of flaws, when finally, Dr. Jackson said, "The loving thing to do, is to drive your own boat up onto the rocks and wait with your neighbour until the tide comes back to float both boats. Advent is a yearly reminder that we are as human beings stranded on the rocks, waiting for God's intervention. The good news is that Christ comes in the form of loving people, and runs his boat up on the rocks and waits with us.

Yes, we must wait for the fullness of the Kingdom of God to arrive, but we do so with each other, and with Jesus. And because of this we can wait with hope.