

What Are We Waiting For?

Here we are on the Third Sunday of Advent, deep into this season of preparation and waiting. We are in the thick of it now. Even though we mark this Third Sunday as the Sunday of Joy, it's still a joy that is constrained somewhat by its location in the Advent season. It's a joy that is held out to us as a promise—as yet unfulfilled. But that's not exactly right. It's more accurate to say that it's a joy that's not completely fulfilled.

This is the paradox of Advent: we are simultaneously looking backwards to ancient prophecies and the beginnings of their fulfillment in the life of Jesus; but we also look forward to the future, to the time when these promises and prophecies come to a complete fulfillment.

The challenge of Advent is that we live in in-between times. What makes Advent a poignant mixture of longing and trepidation is our awareness of promise and possibility, of what God has done in Jesus; and, at the same time, our awareness of the nagging persistence of so many troubles in the world, as though the coming of Jesus wasn't enough, that somehow God's attempt to fix the world didn't take.

The song "It Came upon the Midnight Clear" has the lines:

Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long / beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong;

Our sense of trepidation in Advent is increased by the dawning recognition that the nagging persistence of troubles in our weary world has at least *something* to do with our own behavior.

We begin to see that we are at least in part responsible for the persistence of the world's troubles. Our responsibility arises out of our commitment to our self-interest, to our own comfort, even when our comfort comes at the cost of others', or at the cost of harm to the planet in which we live.

Our commitment to our own comfort has a twin, and that is our resistance to the Way of Jesus. Advent brings these issues into sharp focus. And I think that's a good thing.

I also think it's good that you are here today. That you have chosen to come to church in the season of Advent, to sit in this paradox, to be challenged

by the discomfiting, discordant notes of this season.

We come back to this season each year to touch again the hope that some part of each of us still longs for, yearns for. That part of us that still dreams, despite the two thousand years of wrong. That part of us that still responds to what Scripture calls the light that no darkness can overcome. Like the child that leaps in Elizabeth's womb when Mary comes to visit.

And we come willing to challenge yet again our attachment to the things that get in the way of God's vision described over and over again in these passages we've been reading from Isaiah and the Gospel of Matthew. The fact that we are here means that we are at least a little bit willing to have our fingers pried loose from some of the things we're still attached to.

So to review where we've been so far: a couple of weeks ago I preached about Advent as countercultural, inviting us to a different way of preparing for Christmas than our culture offers. Last Sunday, John Burton preached about "creative destruction," and turning away from a mindset of wishing for our enemies' destruction, and instead praying and working for the transformation of enemies into friends.

And today Caroline read for us another pair of passages from Isaiah and Matthew. Once again, the Isaiah passage sets out a vision of a future that we might all yearn for: barren wastelands become lush, verdant,

flowering meadows; weak hands are made strong, and feeble knees made firm—that sounds good, right?

All kinds of physical challenges are overcome: the blind can see, the deaf can hear, the lame can walk and even leap for joy, the mute can speak. And no one need be lost or in danger anymore because a way will be made to lead people safely home.

Many of these images are then echoed in the passage from Matthew's gospel, as Jesus responds to John's question by pointing to the effects of his ministry: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." You can see a parallel there with the Isaiah text.

Now, it's important to note that these are texts that were written down 2,000—and in the case of Isaiah, more than 2,500—years ago, and so they use the idiom of their ancient cultures to present a picture of everything being made right. In that cultural context, lush gardens and abundant water was a picture of everything being right with the world, because they allowed for a good life; whereas dry land and burning sands, populated by wild beasts represented a threat to life.

Similarly in those cultures, blindness or deafness, or other physical challenges were seen as examples of things that were wrong with the world, things that would be corrected by God in an ideal world, so that sight and

hearing and speech and mobility would be restored.

Today we have different understandings of physical challenges: we don't see them solely as something wrong that needs to be fixed. We don't see people with challenges as broken or in need of repair. We understand that there are many ways for people with physical challenges to live full lives; and sometimes it's factors like discrimination that pose bigger problems than blindness or deafness or mobility issues.

This is what these texts are getting at: they are picturing a world in which abundant life is available for everyone. Just as the natural world is rich and bountiful, so all human beings have access to a full and rich life. Those who are excluded on the basis of physical ability, like those who are excluded on the basis of gender, or race, or because of poverty, or background, or education: all of these exclusions are swept away.

This is the promise spoken of by Isaiah, and it's the promise that Jesus is saying is being fulfilled in his ministry. Look!, Jesus is saying, What do you see? It's happening! The time has come.

So then, to go back to the question I asked at the beginning, Why are we still waiting? Why didn't what Jesus started just continue and continue, and spread all round the earth, until that vision was made complete? What's taking so long? What's holding things up? I said at the beginning that at least part of the

problem—and let's be honest, probably a pretty big part of the problem—is us.

There's another gospel passage, in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus quotes Isaiah, and says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Imagine that! Jesus came to do these things; Jesus came to say, This is God's will for the world. And for his troubles, Jesus was put to death.

Jesus was put to death by people who didn't want to see Isaiah's vision come true. People for whom that vision of some kind of equality and inclusion, and access to the things that make for abundant life—people for whom that vision seemed to be bad for business. People for whom that vision challenged their notions of power, and how the world ought to be run.

People whose livelihoods, or whose power, depended on dividing people up and categorizing them, and assigning them different value, based on their gender or race or physical ability. For people like that, this vision of abundant life looks like a threat.

The problem is that these two visions—God's vision proclaimed by Isaiah, and embodied by Jesus; and then this other vision: a human vision of conflict and competition and power over others—these two visions continue to be in a contest for

supremacy all across the millennia, right down to our day.

And we are caught in between them.

That's what Advent exposes: on the one hand, our longing to be with Jesus; and on the other, our reluctant admission that we are often heavily invested in the other way. Our commitments mean that we are often in the way of a fairer, kinder, more just world. Sometimes through our direct actions and choices, and sometimes through the policies and politicians we support. This is the uncomfortable nub of Advent.

What are we waiting for? Are we waiting for Christmas? Why—what do we hope will happen? Are we waiting for Jesus to be born, for the light to come into the world, overcoming our darkness? Okay, well he has come: the Light has come, and will come again. But then what? What are we going to do about it? When Jesus comes, will we let him in? Will we allow ourselves to be changed by his coming? Will this year be different?

I want to humbly ask you to consider doing something different this year. This is the time of year of lots of charitable giving. You get requests in the mail, or by email, and you hear about giving opportunities at work or here at church.

Charitable giving is a good thing, and it makes a difference, and I don't want to discourage you from doing it. But there's a way in which our charitable giving can function like a

salve to our consciences, like a tax we are willing to pay to maintain our privilege. And maintaining our privilege is basically the opposite of what the Bible tells us to do.

So I wonder if you'd consider doing something else. Something that begins to break down the barriers, the social categories, the privilege that separates you from others, in the ways that we see Jesus doing. For each of us it may be something different, but try to think of something you can do that lets you step out of practices that reinforce boundaries and privilege, and into practices that challenge those kinds of boundaries.

Some of you I know do this very well, and the rest of us can learn from you. I remember a couple of years ago, when the Upper Room Mission's kitchen couldn't be used, and Tony and Edna Kuhn made huge pots of soup to help feed the folks in need.

I also remember seeing Anne-Marie and Mark Malek at the Christmas Day dinner at the Catholic Church, sharing table fellowship with other guests. Those are examples of people working to break down distinctions, and working to make real the vision proclaimed by Isaiah and embodied by Jesus.

So for all of us the task is to go and do likewise, to give witness to the vision that we have glimpsed, and whose fulfillment we await. Amen.

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