

Maybe you too, like the author of Isaiah, have been so fed up with the world around you, the way things seem to be, that in complete exasperation you have shook your fist at the heavens and declared “Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and descend!” Somehow, God, would you just shock everyone into turning around and *facing you!* And in the next verse we hear an Isaiah that is much more at peace, more settled, deeply aware in his life of the God *works for those who wait for him.* Then he is right back to total frustration with humanity’s ‘sin’ all around him, with the lack of faithful prayer and the absence of a faithful people! Just as suddenly the possibility of a compassionate God flashes back in front of him and we hear those beautiful lines passed down across the centuries “Still, God, you are our Father. We are the clay, you the potter.” Two lines later he sees nothing but black skies all around him and in the face of all this, cannot understand why God sits there supposedly unmoved and does nothing – The Inclusive Bible in fact concludes chapter 64 with the God who *oppresses us beyond measure with your silence!*

I don’t know how you feel, but when I listen to the news, read the papers about racial violence, brutality, economic struggles, drug overdoses, masses of people escaping oppression and likely death at the hands of ruthless tyrants, or when I walk through darker streets of our city/ glance down back alleys, I too would prefer God to just come down and fix it all! It *really* would save us a lot of trouble! (In our personal lives too we long for God to intercede and repair, to fix things.)

In the Psalms just read, three times we hear the plea “ O God, return to us, let your face shine on us and we will be saved”! This is a desperate people, The gospel reading in Mark doesn’t get any better! It begins with the sun fading, moon clouding over, stars falling out of the sky and cosmic powers! This is the Markan “Little Apocalypse”, a smaller section of a whole chapter in Mark about impending crises and end times. What a way to begin the season of advent, the season of anticipation - hope and joy and peace and love and oh yes, Merry Christmas everybody!

It is a strange way to begin this new season / time of Advent. Prayers that are both lament and weeping, this yearning for a better time. It is unusual and, at the same time, powerful; it is here we need to begin our new church year. Because Advent jolts us out of the ordinary time (Pentecost season) we have just left with the invasive news that it is salvation time! A time of fresh starts, new possibilities for human wholeness, peace, the peace of shalom that is at the heart of Advent’s message. We know that such peace comes with a price – it is a difficult path that often leaves us vulnerable and in a place of risk. It is a journey that will require repentance and forgiveness as heard in the voices of the prophets - men like John the Baptist. As we too look out at our world, and try to live with the reality of North Korea, with this decade’s nuclear threats/ apocalypse, as we think of places like Syria, or Haiti, anticipated eruptions in Bali, and mass escapes in Myanmar, we live in a time of broken heartedness and crises and long for peace but we feel helpless, hopeless. Despite all our best of intentions, the best intentions of the people of God around the world today, and the intervention of the Spirit, the world is yet to be redeemed and so we pray from the bottom of our hearts along with the readings,

that Christ will soon come again and rule over God's creation in power and in justice.

That's what this season of Advent is *really all about* – hope in the midst of hopelessness, a spirit of yearning for that which would be too good to be true, some new and unique expression of God's intention to save a world gone so wrong. How do we capture once more that spirit of hope that seemed present so long ago when men and women of faith yearned for the first coming of the Savior? How do we live well in the in-between time? The first coming long ago and the second coming, not-yet but soon.

Our readings today urge watchfulness – hold traces of hope – through watchfulness. If we listen real carefully – hope lies in the *bold and confident trust in God who does awesome things that we never expected (v 3)* in a God who will intervene to make life peaceable and joyous once more. Hope lies in the image of the fig tree, the lesson for from the gospel today. Mark says: We see the first bud, a hint of green, and joy comes, a smile of anticipation at summer's eventual unfolding. Watch. Wait for it and new, fresh possibilities appear in the most unexpected of places and people. *"No eye has seen any God besides you who works for those who wait"* for hate and wrong to be overcome, for people's lives to be restored. Advent is about the promise that a righteous branch will emerge to execute justice, hope and possibility for God's people – maybe that's us, the church, as we live out an alternate reality than the world's agenda particularly at this time of year. We, God's people hold on the promises of God, even in bleaker days, days when life seems almost impossible – this is when we pray deep down that God will break into the ordinary, bringing the promise of peace, hope and restored life – this is when a new bud will burst forth! All the same, this waiting for God is no passive endeavor. We cannot sleep. It is about active hope that is alive in you and I, in the church; a hope that can feel like a painful longing and a bold step forward, sometimes comes as strong, persistent covenantal allegiance, sometimes is expressed as a passionate patience in the God who is in our midst! Awake to spiritual ways, turning away from selfish pursuits and alert and attentive to Christ in and among us, to the needs of others, even in the mundane of our daily lives, we become part of the watchfulness Advent calls for. Mark 13 importantly reminds the church of the need to remain ever vigilant/ ever witnessing to God's activity in the world!

If we wait for it, Advent 1 tells us, God shows up in the unexpected, everyday moments. Margaret Wheatley, author of turning to one another: simple conversations to restore hope to the future, is one of my favorite books that I happened to be re-reading the last couple of weeks. She speaks of hope as a sacred time and sacred time as a time when we are most open to life or opened by life. Sacred time is not a special place, or a ritual, or a particular group of people. It's more normal than that. It is life revealing its true nature in wholeness. When I am no longer locked inside a small self but open to world, we do our part to bring more life into the world. When we are connected to something, someone beyond ourselves, so contrary to the world's agenda, when we move out beyond ourselves,

then life is not to be feared. For some this sacred time is a moment of surrender or acceptance or grace when we know peace. In turbulent times such as these, we crave connection, we long for peace. We want the means to walk through the chaos intact. This peace is discovered for us in the Christ who came, the Christ who comes over and over again into our lives and we discover we can live in this strange yet wonderful time. Staying open to life, open to each other, open to what is possible; as we connect with one another, my "I can't" becomes a "we can" and hope grows.

*What time is it, anyway? Who knows what time it is?* Many voices will claim to know what time it is and what crisis is at hand – a political crisis, a religious crisis, an economic crisis, an ecological crisis, a social crisis. What voice will we listen to? What response is appropriate? We cannot know. Only God knows but we do know that..

When God breaks into the daily routines of our living, as we open our hearts and lives to the healing grace of God, then hope comes and peace finds a way. It is Advent time and Advent's season of waiting and watching calls for active participation of wailing and weeping, of opening up our lives and our souls with renewed hope. You might say, it is the season when the wailing walls of our lives touch closely with the peace pole. We need to pray and weep for our broken world and humanity and then get up and continue the hope of God, made fresh and new again in our lives. We sing out our songs of "Let there be peace on earth" and at the same time carry a candle burning brightly with the hope of the prophets and courage of the gospel. We can go into advent open to the sacred breaking into our ordinary lives, flooding us with hope for peace and making our hearts strong again, and we can move into the world with courage and compassion. We know that we as a faith community as well as individuals are God's handiwork, God's pottery, shaped by loving hands. We do not lose heart; rather we live with our hearts broken open so that compassion, caring and God's reckless love can find a way into our hearts and the heart of the world.

We watch, we wait for God's presence from day to day. God will reveal God self again. Be attentive. Be watchful. For the presence of God is already among us often bursting forth in unexpected ways!

With the people of today's texts we cry out this Advent season "Where are you God? When are you coming? Come now". Jesus reminds us now, as he reminded them then, that he will come again into our lives, into our world. Be attentive. Be watchful. God's realm is evident but needs our attentiveness for that realm to be fully realized. In the already-but-not-yet of this time we know that Christ walks with us.