

Longing
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37
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This new church season, Advent, begins, not with the anticipation of Jesus' birth, but rather with the anticipation of Jesus' Second Coming. The author of Isaiah cried out to God to tear open the heavens and come down! Jesus related, in our reading from Mark's Gospel, the way in which the Son of Man will return to earth. The earliest Christians were waiting with baited breath for Jesus' return. They thought Jesus would return in their lifetime.

This is the setting for Advent's beginning. Not the trek to Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph, not the earlier visit of the angels to Mary and Joseph nor Mary's visit to Elizabeth, but the longing for God to make a new appearance on earth. Those who wrote the words we heard this morning longed for a new sighting of God; longed for God to come to set things right. They wanted and expected a miraculous inbreaking of the divine into their everyday lives, even their everyday troubled lives. This season of Advent perhaps we can admit to a longing for a new expression of God's intention to save our world.

We long for this new outbreak of the Divine. We want to be alert to God's appearance among us, but often we get distracted. We wander away. We sin, turning ourselves away from the path God has given us. The author of Isaiah even hints that we sin because God hid God's self. Perhaps, he dares to suggest, if God had not left the scene, we would not have sinned. We want to blame God's very lack of physical presence for our own sins. We hope that God did not notice our sin. We remember in this season of Advent our need to repent, and so, we decorate our sanctuary not with the red and green and tinsel of our society, but the blues and purples of repentance. We repent, remembering that God is the Potter and we are indeed the clay, ready to be molded into God's image, the work of God's hand

We pray this Advent for the Second Coming. For a theophany – a God sighting. But, do we pray that wholeheartedly? Do we really want to see God? I think that is a question that probably has a mixed answer

for most of us. We might declare, “Of course, we want to see God. We want Jesus to come again.” But, even as we say that our gut is sinking. Maybe we just want to feel we are near God, rather than actually welcome God into our midst.

“Yet, I think that is why many people go to church—and “church shop” for that church in the first place. We want to be close to God. Or, at the very least we want to want to be close to God. We like to think of ourselves as people who are “spiritual,” and we certainly want others to think we’re so. But, usually we seek a place that is safe and comfortable for us to do that.

Or, do something that halfway resembles that anyway.

And, the coming of Messiah into the world is what shatters that whole convention. Both the Incarnation and the Parousia—both comings of Christ which we remember intently each Advent—proclaim boldly that God comes to us.

And God comes with surprise. And wonder. And humility.

And peace.

But, our general stance of wary-curiosity is vanquished by Isaiah 64. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

Imagine praying that in church. Imagine in the land of mainline Christianity someone crying out for the Lord to come—as he did in ages past with great might! Imagine praying that like we meant it—as if at any moment the sky might be rent, and the trump would resound.

And then, declare that we are merely clay in the hands of the potter.

Please, O Lord, come down and mold us.”

For four weeks out of every year, our Advent time will focus us on the hope that God will come to save God’s’ people. These four weeks are meant to awaken us from our monotone slumber. These four weeks are meant to help us name and work on our trepidation and mixed emotions about God’s appearance.

We pray as the ancient Israelites prayed, “Don't be so angry with us, LORD. Please don't remember our sins forever. Look at us, we pray, and see that we are all your people.”

A couple from the United States spent some time serving as missionaries in one of the former Soviet republics. They were caring for children in an orphanage and, like anyone who has been involved in ministry with such kids, they were simply overwhelmed by the tragedy of so many children who'd been abandoned.

On one occasion this missionary couple was teaching the children about Christmas. They told them all about Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise men, and about the baby Jesus. They told them all about the stable, and the manger, and the star in the sky. They told them all about God's love for the world embodied in the birth of Jesus. And after teaching the children the Christmas story, this couple invited them to draw some pictures of the manger scene.

All of the pictures were wonderful! But one in particular caught their attention. It was drawn by a little boy named Misha. And what made Misha's drawing distinctive was that there was not one, but two babies lying in the manger.

“Misha, what a wonderful picture!” said the woman missionary. “But who is the other baby in the manger with the baby Jesus?”

Misha looked up with a lovely expression on his face. “The other baby is Misha,” he smiled.

“Oh? How is it that you added yourself to the manger scene?” she asked.

And Misha said. “When I was drawing the picture of the baby Jesus, Jesus looked at me and said, ‘Misha, where is YOUR family?’ I said to Jesus, ‘I have no family.’ Then Jesus said to me, ‘Misha, where is your home?’ And I said to Jesus, ‘I have no home.’ And then Jesus said to me, ‘Misha, you can come and be in my family and live in my home.’”

Two thousand years after the coming of Christ, millions of children come from situations like Misha's. They are still awaiting a Savior. You'll find them in the former Soviet Union. You'll find them in Afghanistan.

You'll find them in Africa. You'll find them in the gang-ridden neighborhoods of our inner cities. You'll find them right here in our own community.

Of course, it is our responsibility to reach out to these little ones, to show them the love of Jesus, but for the most part, they will be forgotten this Advent season. Their only hope is that Christ will return and usher in the kingdom promised in Scripture, a world where there will be no more suffering, no more pain; where people will live in peace and harmony, where in Isaiah's beautiful imagery, "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them (Isaiah 11:6-9)." Do you not hear the cry of these little ones? "Oh, that you would tear apart the heavens and come down . . ." The Savior has come, but much of the world still awaits a Savior.¹

As we wait and consider our plight, what is it **we** long for? We long for the peace and wholeness of God surely. We long for children like Misha to have loving families. We long for the healing power of Jesus. We long for justice and mercy for ourselves, and for our enemies, I hope. We long for the comfort of our home and family as we ideally want them to be. We long for so many things that at times we become numb to the expectations of hope. We hear the longings of the Occupy protesters for economic justice and we think they are simply naïve or perhaps misguided. We see the unemployment statistics, the rise again of foreclosures, the difficulty those around us, perhaps we, have in finding a job or getting health care. This Advent finds us again longing for peace in the world; we see the Arab spring protestors demanding a new way of life; we see the troops still oversees fighting in harm's way; we see the economic groanings around the world – nations on the brink of bankruptcy, our nation with economic problems our legislators cannot or will not deal with. And yet we dream, each Advent, time we make it clear that we dream of God's presence among us.

And through our ministries with (the mission garden,) the food pantry, the Lansing City Rescue Mission, our support of Open Door ministries and Paul Webster (Jeff and Anna Wormus) the Thanksgiving and

¹ King Duncan, "Waiting for a Savior," esermons.com.

Christmas projects, we demonstrate that we have made commitments to God's people and dreams in the name of the One to come. Are there days when the dream is fragmentary, barely remembered? Yes. Are there moments when the work seems fruitless? Yes. Do the resources seem too meager? Often. But in Advent we dare to dream.

We begin this Advent remembering our fears and remembering our dreams. We belong to a God who will not submit to our demands. We belong to a God who will continue to break into our reality in ways both miraculous and humble. These inbreaking times jolt us out of Ordinary Time and throw us into this time of preparing for new possibilities, now wholeness.

The inbreaking of the Divine jarred the wise men from the East into taking a long trip, solely based on their knowledge of the stars and their desire to see the new king. Their longing probably led them on for several years, they ventured into foreign lands all to search out the one whose star was leading them on.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart." Our prayers – whether the ripped out cry of our hearts for God to come down and be with us, or the quiet and desperate prayer that our hope is dying – our prayers are the longing of our hearts. We pray...

How long, O Lord, how long will we have to wait for you to "give ear," to "stir up Your might," to "restore us," to "turn again" and "let your face shine" upon us? This psalm of Isaiah, "confesses [our] trust in a God who is big enough to hear [our] hurt, strong enough to handle [our] anger and pain." [We] "are in a world of hurt. [We] want God to know about it"².

We lift our prayers to God, our Father. We remember that God is the father to whom the exiles of Israel cried, we remember that our cry itself is a measure of our trust and hope in God's presence with us. We lift our prayers to God. Amen.

² Talitha Arnold, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1.