

WAIT WATCHERS

Summerlea U.C.
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November 29, 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37
The 1st Sunday of Advent

Prayer: Gracious God, today your scriptures speak to people who have longed for a world made new, the fulfillment of your promises, and the end of struggles and doubts. We share these longings. Help us to listen for your word of hope. Give us eyes to see signs of your presence among us, and inspire us with the courage we need for the living of our days. And now, may the words of my mouth... Amen.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, that yearly time of waiting and preparation that leads us to our celebration of Christmas. It seems fairly clear by now that, in this time of coronavirus pandemic, Christmas is going to look very different for many people this year. It seems to me, however, that most people are making adjustments, focussing less on what they cannot do, and more on what they CAN do, even though it may be different from normal.

All of which says to me that, even in this time of coronavirus pandemic, even with the world being in the state it's in, there is still reason to celebrate Christmas and all that it means.

Some of us adults might not readily admit it, but we look forward to Christmas as much as the children do, although probably for different reasons. Like children eagerly waiting for Christmas morning, and finding the time passing so slowly till it gets here, many of us adults just can't wait for the coming of that time when we are reminded once again of the possibilities for peace on earth, and good will among all people.

We look for a break from the regular routines and allow ourselves to think that the peace and love and beauty of Christmas just might go with us into the coming year.

So, a season of waiting before Christmas is not always greeted with open arms. And maybe that's because we know what waiting is like, and we don't like it.

But most of us know what it's like to have to wait:

Waiting for pain to come to an end, waiting for the soul-numbing cloud of grief to break, waiting and watching as a loved one nears death, waiting for the strength we need to make it through the difficulties we face.

We wait for results from the x-ray, from the lab, the results of a biopsy, or a cat-scan.

We wait for news of layoffs, of restructuring and down-sizing.

Some wait for news of a new treatment, a new drug, a new discovery.

All around the world, many wait for conflict to cease, for help to arrive, for imprisonment to end, for something new to begin. Waiting and watching, watching and waiting...it is an experience we know well. It can be a waiting filled with promise and hope, and it can be a time of uncertainty and fear. Like a child on a long journey we want to cry out, "are we there yet? How much longer? When will we get there? Will it be soon?"

The people of Isaiah's day cried out for God to tear open the heavens and come down, to break through the pall of despair they are feeling. "How long, O God?" they cry out. "How long before you come and save us?" This is the communal lament of a people who were returning to Jerusalem after the exile, only to find their city of Jerusalem and their lives in ruins.

And so they ask, "God, where are you? How can you just sit there silently in the midst of all this suffering? Why don't you tear open the heavens and come down and save us?"

Maybe that's the question to which Mark responded in today's gospel reading. At the time that Mark was writing (about 600 years after the time of Isaiah), the temple had

once again been destroyed, and the full ferocity and violence of Rome was visited upon the Jewish people of Palestine.

The early church believed that Christ would return in their lifetime, bringing with him the full realization of God's realm of peace and justice. They believed that, by this, the whole world would be transformed and all the faithful would be gathered safely into the arms of God. But it did not happen. More and more time went by, and again, people found themselves waiting.

In the face of disaster (whatever form the disaster might take), how tempting it often is to wish that the end of the world is at hand. There's nothing to do but wait for God to act, and it should be happening any moment now. Mark was writing to people who felt this kind of despair.

They're asking when God is going to do something. And Mark calmly reminds them that the time will come. The world is in God's hands. We do not know the day or the hour. Only watch and wait.

As a minister, I'm one of those people whom others turn to when their lives are turned upside-down, people who are asking, "God, where are you? Why do you allow such suffering to continue?" And they are looking for answers. And nothing like, "don't worry, it's all in God's hands" is going to be enough.

"That's not a good answer," they cry out. "We want to know when? How long? What do we do while we wait? What do you mean 'watch and pray'?" They want someone to help them to find some way to bring hope out of their mud and tears. Only after all their anger and despair have all spilled out, only then can the thin thread of hope be grasped.

The early Christians found ways to strengthen themselves for their waiting and watching, and for their task of being the hands and feet and voice of Christ in the world.

They gathered, as we do, to tell stories, to sing their songs, and to learn from one another.

And one way they came to tell their story was around the table. As they gathered at the table, they broke bread and poured wine and remembered the many meals they shared with the earthly Jesus.

That evoked for them the memory of how God has been with the people throughout the ages, and that helped them to be able to give thanks that God is, and always has been, with us. And even today, whenever we share in this meal together, we find ways to express our faith that God's vision of justice, mercy, freedom, and love will one day come into being in our midst. Only we say it much more simply: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." This is our own way of saying as best we can that our watching and our waiting will one day come to fruition.

It is not as dramatic as we sometimes wish. Sometimes it's only a whisper, a touch on our cheek, a feeling in our heart, but we find ways to trust it.

And so, we come. We come confessing that we, too, are afraid, that we are angry, that sometimes we want to give up. We come asking, "God, where are you in all this?" And God listens to us. And hearing our communal lament and our grief and our sorrow, calmly and confidently smiles on us and invites us to be the hands and feet of Christ.

We are invited to watch and to wait, lest we miss the surprising ways that God is present in us, around us, between us, and among us; in our neighbour and on our streets, in our lives and in our world. This is what allows us to begin to have hope in that which is not yet, and to trust that, one day, the waiting will be over, and the wait will be worth it.

And so, our season of Advent, our season of watching and waiting, begins.

Thanks be to God. Amen.