

## **“WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?”**

**Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37**

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There are many kinds of watching and waiting. There's the not-enough-time-for-dinner routine where you put your bowl of soup in the microwave, stab out the minimum required time on the keypad, and impatiently tap your fingers on the counter as 90 seconds count down and steam finally appears above the bowl: dead time, begrudged time, because we want it fast, we want it now. We watch and wait, but that's not Advent watching.

When my children were young, and we lived in Seattle, their dad was a bus commuter most of the time. And so, many nights round about 5:30, two wiggling little girls would climb up the back of the couch, and laugh and poke each other, craning their necks to look as far into the darkness as possible to be the first one to see the #77 bus lumbering up the street. It's another kind of waiting, closer; but Advent waiting is not quite like that.

Then there is the waiting of pregnancy. One receives the news: a child is to be born here, and on one level, life goes on much as always: work to be done, dinner to be made, friendships enjoyed, a steady continuity with the dailyness of life that was before; but alongside that ordinary time, a counterpoint rises like the heartbeat of new life. Suddenly you are watching, aware: of pregnant women, and parents holding babies all around you; aware of sales of children's clothes, diapers, toys; aware of small signs, the day by day physical and emotional changes that will culminate in life being forever altered. There is special work to be done; room made ready; small clothes laid out and placed in drawers. You find moments where all else falls away except an expectant wondering: what will this new life bring; what challenges and joys; what particular features; what will life look like after this? You watch and wait; you wait and watch until each breath is expectation. Of all the kinds of watching and waiting of our world, this is most like Advent.

Cries the prophet Isaiah: “O God, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake with your presence, as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil.” Isaiah lived among a people in exile. The world had all gone wrong. The ruler on the throne was not one of theirs: his voice strident, his decrees anathema to an alien and alienated people. The culture surrounding them was bewildering, foreign; the people worshipped idol after idol that was not God. Might and power were valued above right and righteousness, and though the empire of Nebuchadnezzar was awash in plenty, the wealth was unevenly distributed, the many poor onlookers to the wealth of the few. It was a time far distant from our own, and yet not so much different.

They prayed to God to come and help them, to enter large on the stage of history and with a mighty arm to change what was into what should be. Images of earthquake, of fire, of cataclysm, of storm, the people's notion of how their God should work to save. Large gestures, bold maneuvers: this is how the God of Israel should redeem the people.

Five hundred years later, in a sleepy town on the edge of nowhere in particular, a weary young couple sought shelter, shepherds gazing at the midnight sky saw something different, a newborn baby cried in the darkness, and slowly, almost imperceptibly, alongside the rhythm of the way things

are, new life began a quiet but steady counterpoint. For two thousand years now, the message of the Coming One has held that rhythm. Through the rise and fall of empire, the clash and rebirth of cultures, through life and death, slow change and cataclysm, the rhythm of salvation, the counterpoint of the way things might be has beat and beat and beat.

In all times, there have been those whose hearts and ears have been specially tuned to this alternative message. We call them seekers and saints, the holy ones of all deep religious tradition. Theirs has been the gift of a kind of spiritual deafness to the loud and often chaotic beat of the way things are, an ability to focus their hearts and spirits elsewhere. But for the rest of us, it's not so easy. Like the people of Isaiah's day, we are caught up in the ways of the world, so much so that we would look for the coming of God in wrong places. We, like so many before, want God to come and save us in large, pronounced, inescapable actions, the certainty of boldness, the security of a mighty hand. We want to be able to look and point and cry, "This is our God," and a new world be laid complete before us.

But God seldom chooses to work that way. Instead, there is just the rhythm of the way things could be, beating always alongside of what is. We need time to stop and still ourselves, to tune ear and soul to that faint persistent rhythm. Outside in the world, it is the holiday season, glitter and twinkle lights, artfully packaged gaiety and trips to the mall, Christmas carols played from classical to country. In the church, we prepare to hear again of Christ's coming: restraint, reflection, quiet, minor-key melodies that tug at our hearts and move us to listen, listen for the rhythm of God's time, God's good, God's desire and hope for a weary and broken world.

The goal is not that we forsake the world outside the church for Advent's listening. There is much in the life about us that is good, that is beautiful, that delights eye and ear and heart. We should rejoice in all that. But in Advent, we are made consciously aware of the duality of our lives as Christians. We participate in the world that is, but we should always be looking for the quiet, subtle signs of the way things might be breaking in around us: the son of a congregation member off to join the Peace Corps, the anti-war protester stalwartly standing in the rain on a winter evening, the woman on the city street who gives the homeless vet on the corner not pocket change or a five dollar bill but a \$50, and just as important, looks squarely into his troubled eyes and offers a heartfelt greeting. All around us—if we look for them—we will find acts of mercy and kindness, voices raised for justice, persons of generous spirit who care for the poor, the vulnerable, the unloved. It's not earthquake or fire, cataclysm or the armies of God. Instead, it is more like an unremarkable couple giving birth in an unremarkable town before unremarkable witnesses. You have to look; you have to listen; you have to remember to pay attention if you wish to participate in the rhythms of God's coming. So it has been and so it continues.

Keep Advent. Journey in this season from the busy world to the quiet church and back again. Look, listen, prepare. The One who came among us once still comes; and if we watch and wait, we will see the signs of his coming. Keep Advent. Until the beat of your heart is attuned to the steady quiet rhythm of God's love, and you are ready to see wonder in what others would deem unremarkable. Keep Advent and some day soon, you will hear the angels sing, and Christ's constant message of peace and good will to all. Thanks be to God. Amen.