

1 Advent, Yr. A
November 29, 2020
Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37

Advent. It's almost synonymous with waiting. How many sermons have we all heard on that topic. And it's right, of course, because we ARE indeed waiting, waiting to celebrate the birth of the Christ child once more, waiting for the second coming, waiting for the Kingdom to be finally realized, waiting for God to finally put everything right. So, yes, waiting.

But I was a bit taken aback when one commentator I read pointed out that Jesus doesn't talk about waiting. Instead he talks about WATCHING. For instance, in this gospel, he's telling his disciples to watch for the signs, just as they would watch the fig tree putting out its leaves and would know that summer was near. If we are right and the Kingdom of God is Jesus' central message, then I think it's legitimate to say that Jesus is telling us to watch for those signs of the inbreaking kingdom and, further, to watch for those opportunities when we can assist that in-breaking. One way to think about this morning's scriptures is through that question: WHERE DO WE SEE THE KINGDOM. We could phrase that another way, WHERE DO WE SEE GOD IN ACTION?

That ties into the Isaiah reading. First, some context. This was written sometime after 586 BC, after the Babylonian conquest, after everything had completely fallen apart: the country conquered, the leadership in exile, the temple destroyed. It all seems pretty remote to us, but I think it would have been like experiencing 9/11 throughout the whole country. Everything we valued, everything we identified with – all gone. Isaiah is trying to figure out why this happened. In the chapter just before the one we heard this morning, he looks at Israel's history – and at the

action and presence of God in that history. Why, he's wondering, why no more pillars of cloud or fire? Why no more plagues on the pharaoh? Why no manna? Where are you? Why aren't you tearing open the heavens and coming down? The text doesn't say this, but it could: **WHY AREN'T YOU SMITING OUR ENEMIES?** As someone pointed out, Isaiah wants that powerful God and he wants that God to have a cosmic bullhorn. Nobody would miss God's coming. All the nations would tremble at God's presence, Isaiah says. Instead, he laments that God is hidden, that God has hidden his face from his people.

And he goes on to say that because God has hidden his face, the people have sinned. If you would just show your face, all would be well. It's because you hid yourself that we transgressed. You hear the same thing in the psalm: **SHOW US THE LIGHT OF YOUR COUNTENANCE AND WE SHALL BE SAVED.**

I think there are a couple of ways to think about this. The most obvious is that humans are passing the buck, putting the blame on God, just like Adam and Eve in the garden. It's **YOUR** fault because you hid your face. But there's another way to look at it and that's to say that we **NEED** to see something of God so that we can see our way. Without that sight, that perception, we wander off, we get lost, we forget what we're supposed to be about. We need to **SEE** God's face, God's countenance, something of God and God's kingdom breaking into our world.

When the lectionary group met on Tuesday, we talked about this scripture. And I said something to the effect that when I first read the Wizard of Oz, I completely missed the fact that the reason everything was green in the Emerald City was because Dorothy and her companions had been fitted with green glasses. And wouldn't it be great if we could each be fitted with **GOD** glasses, so that everywhere we looked, we'd see God or some evidence of

God's working in our world. Instead, we have to be intentional about looking. We have to WANT to see God.

There's that story about a little boy who was playing hide and seek with some friends. He had gone off to hide, but the other kids had been called in to dinner and no one came to find him. After waiting a long time, he went home and was tearfully telling all this to his Rabbi grandfather, who comforted him and said, "That's also the story of God who says, 'I have hidden myself in the universe, but no one cares enough to even search for me.'" Are we looking?

If we ask ourselves what this reading is saying about humans, we see a couple of things:

First, there's that unattractive buck-passing. And then there's our need to see God in our world, but the fact that we often don't care enough to even look. And then, if we do look, perhaps we're looking the wrong places: in the spectacular tearing open of the heavens instead of the person who is asking us for a cup of water. But also, this scripture reminds us that we can't do this on our own, we need that light of God to illuminate those kingdom moments. Referring again to the lectionary group, one person told a story about a grandmother who left a message on what she thought was her grandson's phone inviting him for Thanksgiving. It was the wrong number, but the young man who owned the phone called her and said, "I'm not your grandson, but I'd love to come to dinner." And that was the beginning of a fruitful relationship between the two. Someone else pointed out the daily miracle of our brains and minds, or of a newborn baby, or of modern medicine, or of each individual leaf on every tree, acting as a factory to change light into sugar. Surrounded by miracles, but we need to watch for them.

And then the question about what the scripture is saying about God. First, perhaps, is that God isn't hidden at all. He's here and just waiting to be discovered. Waiting for us to care enough to search for him. St. Athanasius is quoted as saying, "The Lord did not come to make a display...but to be known according to our need and as we could bear it." You will remember that people of the OT thought that no one could see the face of God and live. And you'll further remember that when Moses asked to see God's face, God sheltered him in the cleft of the rock, letting him see only God's back. So the fact that we get only glimpses of God could be because we are shown, as Athanasius says, only as much as we can bear.

But having said all that, here's another thought. And that is that God has already torn open the heavens and come down – he did that through the birth of Christ. He came, he stayed, he's here. When I was in seminary, the dean spoke in chapel one morning. I was at SMU and I think that Methodists had much more of a missionary mindset than old RCs like me, so there was a lot of emphasis on missionary work. But, just remember, the Dean said, if you go off as a missionary, it's not like you are BRINGING God to people, as if God wasn't already there. God IS there. All you are doing is helping people SEE that; helping them discover the God that is already there among them.

One of the things I read in preparing the sermon was a writing that contrasted two ways of understanding the world. We can see it as Shakespeare's Macbeth: That life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Or we can see it as the French priest and paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin saw it when he said, "There is something afoot in the Universe that looks like gestation and birth." Something new is being born. There's our hope and our joy; there's what we're watching for. Amen

