

WHAT'S NEXT?

11/29/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Advent 1 (B): ~~Isaiah 64:1-9~~; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

It's a little deflating to enter into Advent (that's right...we left the church building at the beginning of Lent and here we are, now, in Advent! How'd that happen!!??). Anyway, it's hard entering Advent, when we know we won't have our regular Christmas celebrations. I think one of the hardest things for me is not being able to plan. I'm a planner! I'd like to organize when I'll next get together with friends for a dinner party; I want to schedule my next trip to see my family in Montana; I'm tired of not being able to book dates for my next vacation; and I mean a real vacation, not just a drive out of town where I can't go to any restaurants.

The question "What's next?" has basically been my constant companion throughout my life, but there's not much point in planning right now. Because, right now, the answer to "What's next?" is more of the same until the pandemic's over—and we don't know when that'll be.

All we can really do is try to create some sort of new normal in our households, wear our masks when we go out, follow the latest health guidelines, be ready to pivot when those change, and be alert at all times to avoid exposing ourselves and others to the virus.

In many ways, that describes the season of Advent in a nutshell. Our experience of living through a pandemic is a lot like the way our Gospel reading asks us to live through Advent. We can't control the arrival of Christ, so we wait as patiently as we can, but we also stay alert so that we don't miss the coming of Christ among us.

What's helpful in all of that is the reminder that it isn't Christmas we're waiting for; it's the arrival of the Christ-child! Today's Gospel points toward the coming of Christ with the prophetic voices of the Hebrew Scriptures. Those ancient texts of the prophets were written during intense times, as the Israelites struggled for a way out of their oppression. They were crying out for change...looking for what's next.

At the same time, many scholars and theologians insist it's not that we're waiting for a second coming of Christ, rather that the incarnation of God into this world as Jesus was THE coming, and now it's up to us to notice the presence of Christ in and among us every day.

From that place, we might ask: where have some of the social justice issues become background noise for us, in a way that keeps us from noticing injustice is still happening? And where have we been lulled to sleep by what seemed like voices droning on and on about the injustice for so long that we have stopped hearing the voices?

Jesus asks us to stay awake; to notice what's going on in the world around us. He also says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." The Word of God, sometimes referred to as the Logos, the vibration of the utterance of God breathing life into our world—that Word is eternal. Another use of "Word" is, as in the phrase: "I give you my word." In that use, word is a "promise." Jesus, as the Word of God, is God's promise among us.

Under extreme pressure or stress, like the oppression the Israelites were facing, humanity has the tendency to move to dualistic thinking. We've been feeling this in our nation for the past several years. As we struggle to fix our country, to address social injustice, to deal with a pandemic, our tendency for dualistic thinking leads to contrasting statements such as: us and them; good and evil; right and wrong.

But Jesus' reminder is that, even though all of these current realities will fade away, God's love, God's promise, God's word will endure. So, during this season of Advent, we breathe deep down into Christ's presence, and recall that God's world is a both/and world, full of mystery and complexities that can't be boiled down to an either/or way of thinking.

We are in an already/not yet world. Christ is among us already, but the reign of Christ hasn't yet been fully realized. So, we stay alert; we keep watch—like watching a fig tree take bloom, we look for signs in nature and in humanity that Christ is present.

I'll leave you with the blessing the Apostle Paul bestowed upon the Corinthians:

Grace to you and peace from God...I give thanks...for you because the grace God gives you will in every way enrich you through Christ Jesus, in speech and knowledge of every kind.

-AMEN

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 64:1-9

⁶⁴O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— ²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! ³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. ⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. ⁵You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. ⁷There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. ⁸Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

- 1 Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock; *
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.
- 2 In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, *
stir up your strength and come to help us.
- 3 Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.
- 4 O LORD God of hosts, *
how long will you be angered
despite the prayers of your people?
- 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears; *
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.
- 6 You have made us the derision of our neighbors, *
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.
- 7 Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.
- 16 Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand, *
the son of man you have made so strong for yourself.
- 17 And so will we never turn away from you; *
give us life, that we may call upon your Name.
- 18 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”