

“THE BETWEEN TIMES”

a sermon on Isaiah 64:1-9, I Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37
December 3, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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I will admit to you that in American society today, “keeping Advent” is a little challenging. And I would add that living in a “college town” makes it even *harder*. This evening, we are hosting our first “Christmas party” at our house for a student group Stefanie works with. *Next* Sunday evening (the *Second* Sunday of Advent), First Presbyterian Church in Oxford has its Lessons and Carols service. We have no choice, really. After next weekend, all of the students *leave*.

That said, I also take Advent *seriously*, and think it is important. Important that we *at least* in our worship services put off the “celebration” theme recognizing Christ’s birth and honoring the Incarnation, by contemplating first the *need* for God’s “intervention” into human life in such a way. The Advent journey does not begin with a party. It begins in darkness and in silence. It begins with yearning for God to speak – for God to say (or do) *something*.

Our reading from Isaiah is a good place to start. Written, most likely, in the days *after* the Babylonian exile – when at least *some* of the Israelites had returned to rebuild Jerusalem, the people discovered that while they had come home, it no longer *felt* like home – at least, home as they *remembered* it. They were in near poverty, now – under the rule of the Persians. There was social and political unrest – tension between those who returned (who, you will recall, were taken by the Babylonians because they were the “brightest and best” of the land), and those who had never left in the first place – who had managed to “make do” during the years of the exile, and were now wary of the return of these Babylonian-ized former leaders and scholars.

It just felt as though God wasn’t really even *there*, to the prophet, and he *longed* for a word from God – he longed for it to be as it was in the days of *old*: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence – as 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! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, [when] you came down, [and] the mountains quaked at your presence.”

There is a Jamaican communion hymn in our hymnal that uses a wonderful image to describe “modern” society. It calls on Christians to bear fruit “in a world of doubt.”

A world of doubt is a sad world, a world without dreams, without hope. And like it or not, the world of Isaiah 64 is such a world – when people heard tales of God’s awesome presence in the past, but saw no signs of it in the present. And *our* world, I would contend, can be such a place.

We begin a new lectionary year this morning. The primary Gospel for the coming twelve months is the Gospel According to Mark, and so you’ll be hearing more about Mark’s perspective in the weeks ahead. I discussed apocalyptic literature last week. Well, Mark was the *most* “apocalyptic” of the Gospel writers – and today’s lesson, by the way, is taken from the most apocalyptic *section* of the Gospel. Mark clearly believed that Jesus’ “return in power” was imminent. Any day now. Right now. Not next year. Not even next month . . . probably.

I call it the “hurry up” Gospel. One of Mark’s favorite words is the word, “immediately.” Every time Jesus does something in his account, he then “immediately” moves on to the next thing. Jesus, in Mark’s Gospel account, is in a hurry to get somewhere.

And that “somewhere” is, of course, the cross, where our salvation is won, and the re-making of the world that is foretold in our Gospel reading for the morning begins in earnest. The cross, Mark believed, set the “process” of restoration in motion, and now it cannot be stopped.

So concerned is Mark with getting to the end of the story, that details about Jesus like his birth are completely irrelevant to him. In Mark, we first encounter Jesus as a full-grown man at the beginning of his ministry. By the end of the first chapter, Jesus has been baptized by John, tempted in the wilderness, gathered his disciples, and healed a leper.

By contrast, at the end of the first chapter of the Gospel According to Luke, *John* has been born, but Mary is still pregnant with Jesus. In fact, Mary and Joseph haven’t even set out yet on their journey to Bethlehem. We have, however, listened to lengthy *songs* by Mary and John’s father Zechariah, celebrating what God has done and is now doing. We have witnessed the work of angels, and we have learned a few things about the Roman empire and its politics.

Don’t worry, we won’t be “canceling” our Christmas celebration because it is Mark’s lectionary year. We will just set his account aside for a couple of weeks along the way.

But you see the problem with Mark's account and his perspective. That was two thousand years ago, and the "second coming" he wrote about hasn't happened yet. Who *wouldn't* have doubts?

Like so many who have gone before us, then we live in what I am calling "the between times" – when God can seem very absent – neither present as He was in the past, nor present as we are told He *will be*, and when we are left – at least at times – with unanswered questions, and with fear and doubt.

Perhaps the Good News for us on this first Sunday of Advent is that the world didn't *just become* a world of doubt in modern times – which is why the prophetic cry for God's intervention is so passionate, and poignant.

Be honest. Don't you *long* for God's to make Himself known? To *be* here? To at least give us an undeniable sign of His presence? To "show up" and "take charge" and solve all these *messes* we're in? "Dispel" the darkness?

But alas, God remains in the heavens. Leaves us here to live our own lives. Comes only in the vague form of a "feeling," or a "guiding presence." Leaves us cryptic messages that we call "sacred writings." Seems to tell us that the kingdom is coming . . . but it never quite gets here.

Do I have doubts? You bet I do. But what I refuse to do, in light of those doubts, is stop longing for the time of prophetic fulfillment, when God's presence is beyond question, when as Paul once put it, we "know fully," instead of seeing as in a "glass, dimly?"

And that, I think, is what separates people of faith from others in the world. We still have doubts, and fears, and anxiety. But we never give up on the vision.

And therefore, the vision continues not only to strengthen us, but to guide us, and actually begin to make the world into what it was intended to be.

The journey of Advent begins in darkness: human darkness. Human doubt, human sinfulness, human need - because the light of a star, after all, is only visible in the darkness. Or in the words of folk singer Arlo Guthrie, "You can't have a light, without a dark to stick it in!"

The journey begins with questions — questions that we need to approach honestly and openly.

What about the "prophetic vision" of restoration? Did it really happen when Christ came into the world? If so, then why doesn't the world seem to be any

different than it was before? And why did the early Christian writers immediately begin to discuss Jesus' *second* coming . . . to "complete" what he had begun?

If, on the other hand, the restoration has not yet occurred, then why has it not come? Will it ever come? Do we really want it? Is it really true?

We can give nice, simple "faith" answers to those questions. But that won't help us on the journey. In order to really arrive in Bethlehem and have something to celebrate there, we need to come to terms with where we think we really are, and why we think the journey is worth the effort.

Do you believe? What do you believe? And why? Does God seem absent from your life? Does the direction of our society seem wrong? Do we seem to lack "guidance?"

"In those days, after that suffering," Jesus said . . . "they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory." *That* is the vision that gives us hope – the vision of God's *ultimate* triumph.

Today, we begin a journey. I pray that you will allow the journey to be one of depth; that in the midst of the busyness, and the social occasions, and the feasting and gift giving, and the music and the decorations, and all that makes Christmas *fun*, you will find time to make Advent real — to consider the darkness of your fears and doubts, and to watch for the star that will guide you into God's presence, and the Good News of the incarnation.

The journey has begun. The darkness is upon us. May you find peace. And at journey's end, may you have joy.

And to God be the glory.