

Sermon: What are you waiting for? (revised 2008)

Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

“What are you waiting for God? Why don’t you tear open the heavens and come down; why don’t you shake the mountains and set the earth afire with the flame of your righteous judgement? Why don’t you prove to everyone that you exist: that you are God, and will have an accounting? Isn’t about time - past time! - that you came to judge the nations and restore peace to your creation? What are you waiting for, God?”

Don’t you feel like yelling that at the heavens sometimes? When tragedy strikes, or evil is done, or the foolish gain power and the wise are silenced, when it seems like only bad news greets our eyes and ears, don’t you wonder why God doesn’t put an end to it all? I do, sometimes. So did the people of Israel; and so did the church in the time of Paul and of Mark. They were waiting, and waiting, and waiting, for God to finally come and put a stop to all the deadly nonsense that human beings have been able to concoct throughout history. They wanted an end to persecution, an end to war, an end to poverty and illness and hunger and oppression. And can’t we just identify with that longing! We want a change, something different from business as usual, and we want God to make it happen - sooner, rather than later! I remember a line from one of my favourite movies, spoken by a jaded, world-weary socialite after one too many corrective comments from his hyper-righteous wife: “God must know an awful lot. Why doesn’t he do something?” (*Enchanted April*)

I think part of the longing for God to intervene in some dramatic way comes from a feeling of fatigue on our part - a feeling that we’ve done our bit, and it’s time for God to get to work and finish what we started. We want to hand over responsibility for change to God, because we don’t want it anymore. *Come on God*, we say. *Isn’t it about time you did something concrete in the world?* In first century language we would ask, *“Isn’t it about time for the day of the Lord to arrive?”*

But, as the saying goes, *we should be careful for what we ask for: because we might get it.* That’s certainly been my experience. And the thing that I’ve been waiting and hoping and praying for doesn’t always turn out to be exactly what I was expecting.

What is it that we’re waiting for? Early Christians were waiting for Jesus to come and judge the earth, and much of our readings in Advent reflect that theme. I think most liberal Christians nowadays have some issues with that whole idea - but I expect that most of us still accept that there will be some point at which we are held accountable to God. Are we really ready to face the ultimate judgement? I am not so sure of my own righteousness that I’m in any great hurry to face the living God, whether it is on some apocalyptic day of judgement, or on the day of my own death. I hope you don’t find that too disappointing in your minister, but I expect most of you have the same kind of doubts.

What are we waiting for? At this time of year we tend to focus on remembering the coming of Christ in the past; and in some ways it’s a pretty non-threatening arrival: a sweet little baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Nothing to disturb our comfort in that, is there? We conjure up our mental image of that holy night, and it is one of warmth, and magic, and peace - and most of all, one of love. We know in our hearts that it is love that was born to us that special night. Getting ready for such a coming is a time of joy and gladness for us.

But the *second* coming of Jesus - that too is what our Advent readings direct us to think about - and that...that’s a little scary...or at least, when I allow myself to really dwell on it, it makes *me* pretty nervous. These images of all light going out of the heavens, of stars falling and the heavens being shaken - these are not comforting images, even though they may describe natural phenomena. And knowing that I will be judged - that’s even less comforting; especially

when I think about the words we read last week: about how we will be judged by how we treated other people.... and I think of all the times I have walked away from a stranger in need; the fact that I haven't visited in a prison since I was a child; that I have so much and people around me have so little. None of those things make me feel very confident when it comes to the time that I will stand before the ruler of heaven and earth and be made accountable for my life.

I get the sense that the prophet Isaiah had the same feeling: that maybe he and his people, though they were waiting in desperation for God's intervention in their history - they weren't quite so sure that they would be able to face the Holy One. They were conscious of the stains on their hearts and their consciences; they looked around them and saw that few, if any, were really devoted to God, were really holding to the way of faithfulness. They felt God's anger was justified; that they deserved God's judgement. Yet, at the same time, they continued to call out to God.

Did they know something we have forgotten? I think the clue is the recognition that God could shape them to suit the divine purpose. God is the Potter, we are the clay. We are constantly being shaped into vessels that can carry the divine light to the world. Paul's letter to the Corinthians reminds them that the church has all they need to be ready for Jesus' coming. We, too, have the gifts we need to be ready for Jesus' coming.

First of all, we have the Gospel: the Word that tells us that God's caring is so great that God came to us in Jesus, to redeem us from everything that holds us enslaved to sin and death. We have the knowledge of God's powerful love, that is constantly re-shaping us to become the people God wants us to be. We have an abundance of gifts to share with one another: gifts of financial resources, of skills and talents, of love and compassion and commitment. So when we ask, **"What are you waiting for, God?"** perhaps the answer is this: **God is waiting to see what we will become; God is waiting to see the process of redemption brought to completion in us; God is waiting to see us live the life of the redeemed: sharing, caring, declaring the love of God in what we say and in what we do. What have everything we need – and most of all, we have the grace of God working in us, even despite ourselves!**

I've told some of you before that one of my Bible teachers in seminary used to say that God longs for the redemption of all of creation, right down to the redemption of what we think of as ultimate evil. God is waiting to see all of humanity respond to the gift of redemption in Jesus Christ. I don't think she meant that everyone has to convert to Christianity. What I think she meant is that God does not want to exert God's judgement and power until all of humanity is able to stand before God and claim the righteousness of God for themselves. God does not want to condemn anyone to eternal punishment; God wants to welcome everyone into a life of abundance and wholeness.

What are we waiting for? We're waiting for a change in the way things are: something different from business as usual. What is God waiting for? Perhaps, God is waiting for a change in us. God has planted the seeds of redemption and righteousness in each one of us. Will they grow and flourish and spread; or will they die for lack of care and attention? Perhaps God has a question for us: *What are you waiting for? You have all the gifts you need: what are you going to do with them? Don't be so impatient for my coming, our Saviour might say. You're not ready yet: use what you have. do what you can do. let the Spirit work in you. and one day, when the time is right. I will welcome you into my Father's kingdom. Amen.*