

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent November 27, 2011
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Isaiah 64:1-9

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18

Mark 13:24-37

Longing for God

Gracious God, stir up your strength and come to help us. Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved. Amen.

Welcome to Advent and the beginning of a new church year. As you can see, the frontal hanging over the pulpit, the clergy stoles, and our brand-new Advent chasuble are all blue. Like me, you may associate Advent with the color purple, for the four Sundays before Christmas have often been called a “mini-Lent,” or “little Lent.” Lent is the long season of repentance as we prepare for the joy of Easter; it has a solemn, somber tone, and its color is purple. But that’s not quite the mood of Advent. There is a movement afoot in the Episcopal Church to re-claim the other ancient color for Advent: the color blue -- a color associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus, with whom we wait this season for the birth of the Christ child. Blue is also the color for hope, expectation, and confident anticipation. Advent does include elements of repentance, but above all Advent is a season for hope. Ahead of us is the celebration of Christ’s birth, and beyond that we look forward to the Second Coming of God in Christ, to the consummation of history, to the Last Great Day when all things will be gathered up in love.

So here on the First Sunday of Advent, we ask ourselves: What are we waiting for? What is it that sets our heart on fire with longing? What is it that we await with eagerness and hope? When we ask ourselves such questions, no doubt all sorts of answers spring to mind, for all sorts of things may seem desirable in the course of a day. Maybe we look with hope toward getting a job or getting a better job, to going on vacation or retiring. Maybe we long for the next family reunion or for our family to get along better. Maybe we long for good health for ourselves or someone we love, or for Congress to get its act together, for some piece of wild land to be protected from development, or for an end to poverty and hunger. At certain moments, sometimes our most ardent hope is simply for the traffic light to turn green.

All kinds of longings flow through us in a given day, desires large and small, petty and noble. But within all our desires streams one basic desire, a desire that God has planted in our depths and that awakens and sings through us whenever we dare to give it voice. Here on this First Sunday of Advent, we open ourselves to our deepest desire, our deepest hope: the desire for the fullness of God, who is the fulfillment of our lives.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence!” cries the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 64:1). The fullness of God's presence is like a fire that kindles brushwood, a flame that causes water to boil. It is not enough for God to look down from the heavens, remote and impassive: God must split the heavens apart, and reveal God's self, so that everyone may know that this alone is God, who responds actively to those who wait for God, who meets those who repent and those who prepare a place for God in their hearts.

The prophet's passion is echoed in today's psalm, with its urgent, pleading verse, “Stir up your strength and come to help us... Show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved” (Psalm 80:2b, 3b). Advent is given to us because we are a waiting people, an expectant people, a longing people. We are restless with the status quo, impatient with business as usual, because God has planted within us a vision and hope of what life could be. Advent is the season to claim our desire for God and for the fullness of God's reign upon this broken, lovely earth. Christians stand open-heartedly in the present, but we are oriented toward the future. We turn toward the future and long for God to come in power and great glory. We look ahead with hope to the future of who we will be -- of what the world will be -- when everything in us and around us is reconciled, when everything that has grown old is made new, everything cast down is lifted up, everything hurt is healed, everything unjust has been made right, and the love that gave birth to the universe is visible at last in all its glory.

Advent invites us to become people who dare, as Walter Wink puts it,¹ to “believe the future into being.” “This,” he says, “is the politics of hope. Hope envisages its future and then acts as if that future is now irresistible, thus helping to create the future for which it longs. The future,” he says, “is not closed... Even a small number of people, firmly committed to the new inevitability on which they have fixed their imaginations, can decisively affect the shape the future takes. These shapers of the future... call out of the future the longed-for new present. In the New

¹ Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination, Minneapolis; Fortress Press, p. 299.

Testament...the name and texture and aura of that future is [called] the reign of God.”

The simplest Advent prayer is the ancient prayer found in its original Aramaic in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians: “Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus” (1 Corinthians 16:22). We are hungry for you, Jesus. We long for your love. We yearn for your justice. It is you who came to cast fire upon the earth, you who longed to set us ablaze with your love. It is you who gave us the parable of the doorkeeper, commanded by his master to be on watch until the master’s return, so that when the master comes back and knocks on the door, the doorkeeper can fling it open and let him in. “Watch,” you tell us. “Keep awake.” For you will come again.

How do we stay awake? How do we wait well? I will give you two small words that can help us this Advent to wait for the fullness of God, to keep awake for the coming of the Lord: prayer and generosity.

Advent is a time for prayer. Our hearts must be open if we are to hear new things and see new things, and so we pray the basic Advent prayer of desire and hope: “Come, Lord Jesus.” In prayer we listen carefully to the voice of God who calls us beloved. Roman Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen used to say that if you think you are worthless, you can’t wait well. You won’t see the One who is coming, because you won’t think you are worth coming to! So we listen to that gentle, inner voice that is always saying to us, “I love you. I created you. I sent you into this world. I want to come closer to you -- because you are worth it!”

This brings to mind a story by Richard Foster from his book about prayer. As Foster tells it, “One day a friend of mine was walking through a shopping mall with his two-year-old son. The child was in a particularly cantankerous mood, fussing and fuming. The frustrated father tried everything to quiet his son, but nothing seemed to help. The child simply would not obey. Then, under some special inspiration, the father scooped up his son, and, holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang off key. And yet, as best he could, the father began sharing his heart. “I love you,” he sang. “I’m so glad you’re my boy. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh.” On they went from one store to the next. Quietly the father continued singing off-key and making up words that did not rhyme. The child relaxed and became still, listening to this strange and wonderful song. Finally, they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to

buckle his son into the carseat, the child lifted his head and said simply, “Sing it to me again, Daddy! Sing it to me again!”²

In Advent, we take time to pray, to “let ourselves be gathered up into the arms” of the Father, the Mother, of our souls, and to let her “sing a love song over us.”³

If one way of staying awake is to be faithful in prayer, another is to be generous to those whose needs are greater than our own. The root of the word “generosity” is the Latin “genus,” which means “race, kind, or kin.” When we are generous, we make others kin. Do you know anyone who is lonely? Do you know anyone who feels bereft, forgotten, or rejected? Do you know someone who might have woken up this morning wondering if it was worth trying to get through one more day, and whether anyone cares? Think about it. Maybe you are just the person who can give that person a word of support, a visit, or a phone call. Maybe you can give someone a good listening-to, like they’ve never been listened to before!

When we are generous, we do what is ours to do. We don’t have to do it all or do it perfectly. We need only to offer the gift that we alone can offer in the midst of the particulars of our lives. Have you ever noticed how particular Jesus’s gifts are? “*This is my body,*” he said. “*This is my blood.*”⁴ We offer what we in particular can offer -- and who knows what will happen then, what creative next step will then be possible? Who knows how God will make use of that gift, so that it multiplies in ways we could never have imagined?

If we do these things -- if we’re faithful in prayer and generous in love -- then we can rest assured that Christmas is coming. God is coming. For Christ was not just born long ago, but is even now being born in our hearts.

God is with us in our hope and longing. To quote Brian Swimme (“Canticle of the Cosmos”):

The longing that gave birth to the stars

The longing that gave birth to life

Who knows what this longing can give birth to now?

² Richard J. Foster, Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home, HarperSanfrancisco, 1992, pp. 3-4.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴ Ann and Barry Ulanov, Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, p. 96.