

Advent 1, 2011

Learning How to Beg

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19;

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

“Come, thou long-expected Jesus, / born to set thy people
free; / from our fears and sins release us; / let us find our
rest in thee. / Israel's strength and consolation, / hope of all
the earth thou art, / dear desire of ev'ry nation, / joy of ev'ry
longing heart.

Today, I'm going to ask you for a favor. I don't ask you
for many favors, but today I'm going to ask you to pity the
preacher in Advent.

While everyone else has rushed headlong into
Christmas before the turkey stuffing was cold, the preacher
is summoned to stand his ground for weeks in the season

of Advent.

Today, for the preacher, and maybe the church, it's still a long, long way to Christmas.

So, I have to say, "No thank you" to Black Friday, and the advertizing, and the jingles, and "93-point-whatever" Lite FM.

For a while I have to say "No thank you" to the trees, the wreaths, the tinsel, and the bells.

And I don't mind saying "No thank you" to the sales, the shopping, and the obligatory socials.

"No thank you. Not just yet. This is Advent. And I love Advent. 'It's the most wonderful *counter-cultural* time of the year.'"

So, I ask you to pity that preacher who, Sunday after Sunday, week after week, lives with Isaiah the prophet and John the Baptist, not really the sort of guys you'd want to hang around with at your holiday parties.

This week it's Isaiah begging God to "tear apart the skies and come down."

Next week it will be John the Baptist dressed in a camel carcass and eating locusts with wild honey.

Note, today, that this is not the Isaiah who sings so beautifully the arias and choruses in Handel's Messiah: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. . . ."

This is not the bright, tenor "voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make

straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

This is not the hope-filled poet who announces that
“Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill
shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough places plain. . . .”

No, this is the later Isaiah, the prophet who laments
the exile of his people in Babylon: “[For] we are all like one
who is unclean, all our so-called righteous acts are like
[bloody] rags in your sight. We all wither like a leaf; our
sins carry us away like the wind.”

Not exactly choruses for Christmas caroling at the
Annual Holiday Stroll in Riverside this coming Friday
evening.

I know, everybody wants Christmas jingles NOW, and all the church gives you is Advent austerity NOW.

The mall has visions of sugar plums (and cash signs) dancing in its head, and all the church can see and hear is desperate people begging God to “. . . tear apart the sky and come down!”

But what the church hears is what the world cannot hear because of all the noise. What the church hears is the cry of those who have made such a mess of their lives that only God can set them right: “For you have rejected us and handed us over to our own sins.”

It’s a truth of personal experience that only after a crisis, or in the midst of crisis, with the stars falling from

our sky and the ground shaking beneath our feet, that we remember *what is really worth caring about*.

Advent is about awareness—awareness of *what is really worth caring about* in the midst of so much *that is NOT worth caring about*.

There have been times when all of us have had an awareness that God was far “up there” while we languish far “down here.”

This is worth caring about.

We have all felt like Isaiah and the Psalmist that, despite our prayers, raw with emotion, God still seems so silently, silently distant and hidden: “O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?”

weeps the psalmist, “You have fed your people with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.”

This is worth caring about.

We all have *begged* God at one time or another for a new job, for the healing of a disease, for reconciliation with an adult child, for guidance amid confusion, for peace when overcome by anxiety, for solace when a heart is aching.

Yes, we have *begged* God, because begging is part of believing.

“If only you would tear apart the sky and come down!”

“Tear apart that star-studded curtain in the temple and

reveal yourself.”

And so, finally it happens, in Mark’s Gospel, that when Jesus is baptized, “just as [he] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove,” and when Jesus is crucified and “breathes his last. . . the temple curtain was ripped in two, from top to bottom.”

Finally, it happens, not in the way the old prophet Isaiah expects, not in the way that Israel hopes for, but in the way that God chooses to reveal himself.

“The Christian faith is a thing of unspeakable joy,” writes C. S. Lewis. “But it does not begin with joy, but rather in despair. And it is no good trying to reach the joy

without first going through the despair.”

Even though Costco displayed its holiday merchandise in October, and “93-point-whatever” began playing holiday music the day after Halloween, Christmas is still a long way off: “And it is no good trying to reach the joy without first going through the despair.”

Otherwise, it will not be Christian choruses of “Joy to the World” but just another Burl Ives “Holly Jolly Christmas.”

I count several weeks of encroaching darkness that will lead us into the longest night and the shortest day of the year. These days are difficult, especially for people who wrestle with depression and anxiety.

I see that the autumn leaves have vanished and the summer grass will fade: “We all wither like a leaf,” the prophet admits, “our sins carry us away like the wind.”

So, the church comes to the Advent season of watchful waiting, for “God acts on behalf of those who wait for him,” says prophet, “[who] does awesome things that we did not expect.”

Likewise, Paul commends the Corinthians for “eagerly waiting for our Lord Jesus to be revealed,” and the Ephesians are reminded that God does “immeasurably more than all we ask or even imagine.”

“Patient endurance is what you need now,” writes the author of Hebrews.

Someone has claimed that Christians, especially in the west, have forgotten how to do something very crucial to the faith, something that generations before us have known clearly how to do.

He says that we have forgotten *how to wait*.

And he says that we have forgotten *how to beg*.

“The price we've paid for our sense of privilege,” he writes, “for our sense of entitlement that expects everything here and now, as our God-given right, at our beck and call, is that we have forgotten *how to beg*.”

Maybe we have forgotten because we are so pleased with the way things are, so settled with present arrangements, just fine with life as we are living it.

And if you really believe that this world, with “lots of toys and goodies on [its] sleigh,” is as good as it gets, well, then it may be hard for you to hear what the prophets and John the Baptist have to say.

Whether Jesus’ words about the ending of one age and the beginning of a new age strike you as good news or bad news depends upon how well you’re doing in the present age.

If you’ve already reached the promised land, then these words can be *threatening for you*.

But if you’re still languishing in the wilderness, then these words can be very *promising for you*.

I often hear people say in my conversations with them,

“Well, Pastor, it doesn’t do any good to complain.”

And yet, by making that statement, they are seeking permission to do the very thing they say “doesn’t do any good.”

They’re saying, “I need to complain, maybe I even need to beg, but it doesn’t do any good because no one is willing to listen to me.”

We’re taught not to complain, not to weep, not to beg, maybe even not to hope.

“Keep your chin up, but don’t get your hopes up,” we like to warn others.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” we tell our children, maybe even at Christmastime.

So, most of us just accept “things as they are”

because we have been told, time and again, that “things as they are” is all that we can expect.

So, maybe we hope for nothing more this Christmas than we have hoped for in the past.

But wait.

Wait, the church invites us in Advent.

Don’t go dashing into Christmas as though “things as they are” is all that we can expect.

Wait. Hope. Yearn.

Maybe even complain. Beg. Weep.

Most certainly stay alert, watch out, be aware.

“ . . . As for that day or hour no one knows it . . . For

you don't know when the time will come . . . you don't know when the owner of the house will return.”

We just don't know, and never will know, how God chooses to act.

Listen to the old prophet Isaiah.

Listen to Asaph the psalmist.

These are people who know how to yearn, to wait, maybe even how to beg for God to act.

Which means they have not given up on God as so many of us in exile have done.

They refuse to settle for “the way things are.”

They call us to hope for something new this

Christmas: “Hear us, shine forth, awaken your might, come

and save us, restore us, return to us, look down from heaven and see us, revive us, O Lord Almighty!”

They have not given up on God.

They believe that God is listening and, if not, they’re going to scream loud enough to get God’s attention.

But more importantly, they trust that God has not given up on them.

So maybe, just maybe, we can hope past—hope past “things as they are” this year, the sad seasonal rituals of overspending, over-drinking, over-eating, over-getting, over-giving.

Not the refrain, “Oh, that a new I-phone, or a new giant screen, or a new car might fill the emptiness,” but “If only

you would tear apart the sky and come down”

I can still hear Katie singing it to us last Christmas Eve under a winter sky, “Love came down at Christmas, / Love all lovely, Love Divine; / Love was born at Christmas, / Star and Angels gave the sign.”

Not “God is watching us. . . / watching us. . . / watching us. . . / From a distance,” as Bette Midler used to insist, but “Love came down at Christmas, / Love all lovely, Love Divine. . . .”

So, in Advent I say, “No thank you; not just yet.”

“No thank you. I shall wait here in the blue dawn of a new day, in yearning and silence, in expectation and hope.”

“How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! /

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His
heaven. / No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of
sin, / Where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear
Christ enters in.”