

December 3, 2017
1st Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 64:1-9 / Mark 13:24-37
The Rev. Carenda Baker

WAITING. Some days we don't mind it. It seems a minor irritation. We arrive on time for the doctor's appointment, and are ushered into the exam room. And then we sit. And sit. And sit. Waiting. . . Looking at the posters on the wall, picking up a magazine, checking our phone – while we wait. We know the doctor is in the house – somewhere. Running behind schedule again. All we need is a medication refill and our annual flu shot. But we have to see the doctor we've been told. So we wait.

Now, imagine a different scene. We have with great labor struggled into the office waiting room and sit with a potentially fatal case of pneumonia. We do not know if there is a doctor in the house at all. This second scene of waiting? Welcome, friends, to Advent.

The prophet Isaiah is leading his people in a communal lament. ***“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . .”*** For those Jewish refugees, God is no longer minding the store. God has left the building, literally. The Temple is in ruins. Isaiah begs God to “come out of retirement.” Don't just stand there silently, God. Do something!”

In their waiting the people are emotionally withdrawn and have lost their will to stay in touch with God. Lost the will to walk anymore in God's ways. They are resigned. God is not coming back.

Have you ever felt like Isaiah or the people of his day, wondering where in heaven or on earth God is? Have you tried to pray and felt nothing, seen nothing, sensed nothing for a long time? Have you ever been ready to throw in the towel or felt the sad weight of Bob Dylan's song, “Knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door”, with no one answering? If so, you have entered Advent.

The Jewish refugees have come to the end of themselves. Isaiah refuses to posture or pretend anymore. It's time to get real – prophets are very good at doing that – cutting to the chase and speaking the truth. Life is a mess and the Hebrew people need God. They want God to cut through the haze of uncertainty and make God's self known to them.

Like their return to Jerusalem was for those Jewish refugees, our world is a mess. Our world is not okay. Things are not well. We wait for God to come and shake things up

and change us for the better. We *hope* for the One who makes mountains quake and nations shake in fear – we hope that this God will come again. We're not sure our faith can endure what our eyes reluctantly witness each day. Sometimes hope itself is a grind. Sometimes hope seems like senseless and futile work.

This week I found myself searching intently, asking “*What IS hope anyway, and where is it?*” And then I came across an online devotional posting called “The Anti-Advent Wreath”. In it the author, pastor April Fiet, writes: “As I reflected on hope and its opposite, I became increasingly convinced that hope – while it may include emotion – is not an emotion in itself. It is a state of being which refuses to let go of the rope we're holding onto, even if we are only holding on by a thread. I believe it is possible to have hope and feel sad simultaneously. We can have hope and also feel as though hope is lost – all at the same time.”

Hmm. Okay. That sounds like what we experience at a funeral – sadness and hope at the same time.

April continues her reflection: “Even when we feel like we've given up, hope can still be there with us. The word for “hope” in Hebrew comes from the same root word as the word for “wait.” And the word for “hope” in Hebrew also comes from the same word as the word for “cord” or “rope”. Hope is like the stretching or twisting of the rope we're clinging to. Hope is like a rope being thrown to us when we desperately need it. Hope is so much more than an emotion. It's an active, expectant state. It is hanging onto the rope even when we don't understand why we're still hanging on.”

She goes on to say that she believes the opposite of hope is not despair, but resignation. “Resignation is an active refusal to hold onto the rope because it's not worth the work. Resignation says, “Why bother?” not because of apathy but because hope has been deemed too foolish to hold onto. Hope holds onto the rope, resignation believes the rope to be useless. Hope is a posture of holding out open hands while resignation insists on clenched fists. Resignation believes that things will never get better, while also working to ensure that things never do.”

We would do well to take a page out of our Hebrew forebears' worship book and reclaim the important connection between lamentation and hope. Lamenting is part of being faithful. It is being truthful and real. These words from Isaiah and the psalm for today are authentic, spoken from the heart of the community of faith. And it doesn't sound anything like a Hallmark Christmas greeting card. “*O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angered despite the prayers of your people? You have fed them with the bread*

of tears; you have given them bowls of tears to drink. . . .Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved."

In their lamenting, the Hebrew people would look back in their history to recall how God had acted on their behalf in the past. *"From 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"*, says Isaiah. Despite their failings and sin, their wanting to let go of that rope . . .

They turn back toward God with one word, one thread: YET. *"YET, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."*

So – what are the ways in which we need God's anointed One to come, to mold and shape us? Maybe it is to restore hope in us, to pull the frayed, thin strands of the cord back together again. Or maybe it is to give us courage to act or to grant us wisdom. Do we need God's Spirit to come and heal us? Do we need to be inspired with vision and the imagination of a different, better world? Are we grieving? Do we need God to sit in the sadness with us, to be with us, catching our bowls of tears, and then, to give us a glimmer of light when all around us is darkness?

Waiting. Hoping. Staying awake and watching – this is the Advent road. It's not for the faint of heart. But we don't walk it alone. The watching means keeping our eyes peeled for the first sighting of that green shoot on the branch of the fig tree. "Here's your sign", in other words, Jesus tells the disciples. Watch for those tiny signs of God's flow of love, God's kingdom at work.

Advent is a season to voice our laments, to lift up our longings, yearnings, and desires, just like we do each week when we offer the Prayers of the People. As we will do this morning in offering prayers of anointing and healing. We lift up our longings, and then we look for a very big God to be present in very small things.

Just when I needed a spiritual lift this week, I read this "short list of what gives us strength", posted on Facebook by Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston:

1. Knowing that we have been through hard times before.
2. Knowing that we are forever in the hearts of those who care for us.
3. Knowing that others have faced what we are facing.
4. Knowing that we have trusted helpers standing by us.
5. Knowing we are in the prayers of many.
6. Knowing trained professionals are on the case.
7. Knowing our family will be alright.
8. Knowing those who have gone to heaven are watching over us.

9. Knowing we have a deep and abiding faith.
10. Knowing that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Ten Advent “knowings” for us, to help us hold onto the rope of hope. The call is to stay awake and look for the showings of God’s active presence in your life, and in the world around us. *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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.*” Keep watch and look for love. Keep watch and respond in love. Take the hand of another who holds onto the rope. May the signs of that first summer green shoot stir hope and resilience in all of us this holy Advent.

Let us pray:

“In this season of waiting,
breathe in life.
Life of the One
who created all things,
whose image we bear.
In this season of waiting,
breathe in love.
Love of the One
who gave a precious Son
to live as one of us.
In this season of waiting,
breathe in peace.
Peace of the One
who calmed the sea
and quiets the tumult of our souls.
In this season of waiting
breathe in hope.
Hope that the One
for whom we wait
is indeed making all things whole.”

(Prayer by Christine Sine – godspacelight.com)

AMEN.