

December 3, 2023
First Sunday of Advent, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

In the Name of the One whose coming we await. Amen.

Well, here we are at last. The start of a brand-new church year! For me, it's a lot like preparing for the first day of school: new clothes, new notebooks, maybe a new teacher and new friends.

And, like the first day of school, it's a little confusing. What's really going on? What are we expected to pay attention to? Are we supposed to be looking at the past, at the stories about the birth of Jesus? Or, even further back, at the prophecies of the Messiah? Or way into the future, when Jesus will come again?

Advent is like that. We find ourselves stretched, pulled in multiple directions at the same time. This morning's Collect gives us clues about being stretched. In the first place, it is full of contrasts: works of darkness vs armor of light. Mortal life vs life immortal. Great humility vs glorious majesty.

In addition, the Collect is vast in scope, sweeping through history. It starts by asking for grace in the present, then reminds us that in the past Jesus dignified our humanity by becoming truly human, and finally it gets to the heart of the matter: that when Jesus comes again in the future, we may be prepared for God's judgment.

The invitation of Advent is to practice holding past, present and future together at one time. Jesus came into our world in person at Christmas. Jesus will come to judge the world at the end of time. And Jesus comes to us even now – in the sacraments, in our prayers and the reading of Holy Scripture, and in the faces of neighbor and stranger.

This Advent posture, this stretched-ness, can be confusing, if not downright uncomfortable. And our discomfort increases when, with our cultural ears tuned to hear tidings of comfort and joy, we are offered instead the wailing voices of lament, and the language of apocalypse.

You may not want to believe it, but we are blessed that the Biblical writers are not skittish about naming and lamenting God's hiddenness. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," cries Isaiah. "Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved," pleads the Psalmist. In Mark's

gospel, Jesus tells us that, "The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." This sounds like a state of godless catastrophe that I wish didn't look so familiar to us today.

One of the blessings of Advent is that we have the chance to scrape away the layers of what a friend of mine calls "toxic positivity" that blind us to the way the world really is. These Advent readings lay out in unflinching terms that our world is *not* okay.

God's apparent absence is *not* fine — it hurts. Beneath all the glitter of the season, it hurts so much we can barely breathe. We wonder if our faith can endure the evil and suffering we see each day. We may long for a Savior to rend the heavens and come down, but, on some days, even the energy required for that longing makes hope itself exhausting.

If your world is not okay, if toxic positivity isn't doing what you'd hoped it would, perhaps the first gift of Advent to you is the permission to tell the truth, even if that truth is laced with sorrow. In the Psalter, among other places, our biblical ancestors have given us models for describing life on earth as it is, not as we would have it. Surrounded as we are by cultures of denial and spin, you and I are called to tell the truth — we need God. We need God to show up. We need God to stick around. We need God to show us the light of God's face, for without that, we suffer.

A second gift that Advent offers is that of making space. When I get closer to putting up a tree, I have to move stuff out of the way. And, over the years, I've tried not to do this in a hurry, but to sit in the changed emptiness, wondering what will occur to me that I was unable to see before. Let every heart prepare him room.

Related to space is another gift, maybe more of a discipline ... waiting. In Advent, we are invited to quieten ourselves, to stop rushing. We can decide to be okay with the not-yet, to call sacred what is unformed as we, in the words of St. Paul, "wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

This makes no sense to the part of us that is more concerned with results than with process. As the world hurtles on toward its own sense of safety through the victory over others by force, Advent reminds us that things worth waiting for happen in the soft, fertile dark. This past Thursday I was struck by the fact that at the very moment Don Curtis lay dying, there were folks here at Grace, planting tulip bulbs for next spring.

Learning to wait for God is like learning anything else. It requires its own set of muscles; it requires exercise, diligence, and patience. My colleague Debie Thomas writes that, "To sit and wait for God — not in bitterness, not with cynicism, not in fake

and frozen piety — is serious spiritual work. But it is the invitation of Advent. To wait.”¹

But what are we waiting for? The fourth gift of Advent is the invitation to prepare for the God who is coming – a God who will turn out to be very different from the one we expect.

Isaiah and the Psalmist call on a Very Big God to do Very Big Things. Who among us has not prayed such outsized prayers? Bring an end to the pandemic. Bring an end to wars fueled by hatred and greed. Protect the vulnerable. Spare the children. Most of all shield us, O Lord, from our sinful, self-destructive selves.

And yet, in Advent, we’re called to make room...for the birth of a child. In his sermon entitled, "The Face in the Sky," Frederick Buechner describes the Incarnation as the kind of scandal that requires us to ponder the shocking unpredictability of God.

"Those who believe in God can never in a way be sure of him again. Once they have seen God in the stable, they can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths he will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of humankind. If holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in this least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too."

What are we to make of this? This makes about as much sense as a king whose throne is the cross. The God who is limitless chooses limit upon limit: one womb, one backwater town, one bygone century, one brief life, one agonizing death.

If I’m honest, this idea of salvation out of weakness is still hard for me to embrace. I think I prefer the “lo, he comes with clouds descending” brand of salvation, because it lets me think that only the bad guys will have to change, and not me.

But this salvation that *I* long for is not the salvation God brings. This is not a comfortable truth. It will require some wrestling on my part, perhaps even weeping. But, you know, come Christmas, I want to be ready to receive God as God is. Not as I might wish God to be or insist that God become. Advent gives us time to prepare for the Savior who *is*.

So, my dear friends in God, here we are. Stretched almost beyond endurance, wrestling with the brokenness of the world and the hiddenness of God. It's okay to struggle with Advent and the grace of its complicated gifts – the gift to name before God the truth about life as it really is; the gift to create space in your life; the gift to learn

¹ Debie Thomas, *Because you hid yourself*, posted 22 November 2020. I am grateful for many of the thoughts reused by me.

to wait in that quiet emptiness that we might hear our unpredictable God knocking at the door of our hearts.

So, wait...pray. Be patient, as much as you can. Hope fiercely. For, deep in the gathering dark, something for the world's salvation waits to be born in us today.

“Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; show the light of your countenance and we shall be saved.”

A blessed Advent to you all. Amen.