

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT | NOVEMBER 29, 2020

ISAIAH 64:1-9 | PSALM 80:1-7, 17-19 | 1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9 | MARK 13:24-37

Let's do a little thought experiment. What are the days when your understanding of the world you lived in drastically shifted? Not dates that are personally meaningful to you, not birthdays and anniversaries, but the days when you went to bed knowing that the world had changed in some significant way. My guess is that if we all wrote down our answers, there would be lots of dates in common. November 23, 1963. January 28, 1986. September 11, 2001. September 15, 2008. There is life as it was before that date, and life as it was after. One date that we would probably overlook is June 29, 2007. The day the first iPhone was released.

What's significant about that date is not the phone itself, that was obsolete within a year, but how it changed the way we relate to information. On June 28, if you wanted to know tomorrow's forecast or who won the game last night or whether Luke Wilson or Owen Wilson was in *The Darjeeling Limited*, you had to read a newspaper, listen to the radio, or find a computer. In short, you had to wait.

We hate waiting. The waiting that once seemed like a normal part of life now feels like an impossible burden to bear. You might skip out on your favorite restaurant if you have to wait for a table. Two-day shipping became one-day shipping, and then one day-shipping became same-day shipping. Telling someone they need to wait almost feels offensive. *Don't you know how valuable my time is?* We've got places to be, things to do, people to see.

Our fraught relationship with waiting is best encapsulated right out in front of this church. Maybe you've had that experience when you try to make a left turn into the church parking lot and the person behind you doesn't want to wait for you to turn, so they squeeze by in this impossibly tiny space only to pull up to a red light where they have to, well, wait.

And that sort of sums it all up. That underneath all of our hustling and efficiency, we still have to wait. We wait for test results. We wait for letters of acceptance or rejection. We wait for decisions. We wait for life. We wait for death. Sure, your iPhone is nice. It can tell you in an instant that tomorrow it will rain, that the Giants lost, that it was Owen Wilson in *The Darjeeling Limited*. But there's no way to get through life without a lot of waiting.

Today's reading from Isaiah is the petition, the request of a people being forced to wait. This was written around the sixth century BC, after the Babylon Empire, where many of the Israelites were living, had been sacked by the Persians. The Israelites who were sent into exile in Babylon now had the possibility of coming home. And the Israelites who remained had a chance for more freedom. This dark period in their history was drawing to a close. This should be good, right?

Well, sort of. It's certainly better. But it doesn't happen all at once. It isn't as if the Babylonians leave and things go back to the way they were. The people have to figure out how to rebuild their homes. They have to figure out how to get along with their neighbors now that they can't be united by animosity toward the Babylonians. And most important, they have to figure out where things stand with God. Has God abandoned them during this exile period? Time will tell.

And maybe that puts the beginning of the reading in some new light. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." God used to be present to our ancestors, the author suggests. God tore open the heavens at Sinai and made the mountains quake. God used to do "awesome deeds." But now? Well, now you'll have to wait and see.

What is it exactly about waiting that makes us so uncomfortable? Why do we go to all lengths to try to extricate it from our lives? It could be the uncertainty. *Are we still in this covenant with God or not?* It could be the inability to make plans. *I feel like my life is on pause for the time being.* But at a deeper level, it might be that waiting brings us face to face with our longing. It forces us to reckon with the fact that there are things in

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the world, things in our homes, things in our hearts, that don't feel whole. Waiting means having to live with desire.

I don't know what it is that you're longing after this season. Maybe you're longing to see family and friends again. Maybe you're longing for more stability and predictability. Maybe you're longing for a moment of solitude or a glimpse of community. Maybe you're longing for justice and peace. Maybe you're longing for something else.

Staying with that longing is difficult. It's even more difficult in this time of the year when we are bombarded with idealized images of holiday celebrations where everything looks perfect. And it can be tempting to pretend that everything is fine. That we're doing okay. That we're doing well, thanks. That we have nothing to complain about.

Because the gap between how we're doing and how we think we should be doing is so large, lots of churches offer these things called Blue Christmas services. These are special Christmas services for people who are going through something difficult, and don't want to do the festivities of Christmas. These are well intentioned, and I don't want to be uncharitable. But if you want a Blue Christmas service, a space where you can hold your desire and your grief and your longing, you should just go to an Advent service. It's not a coincidence that most communities that do Blue Christmas don't really do Advent. They just do a month of Christmas. They don't wait. And so they miss all that imagery of expectation and longing for a better world. Just look at that last verse of today's opening hymn. *Our hope and expectation, O Jesus, now appear. Arise, O Sun so longer for, o'er this benighted sphere. With hearts and hands uplifted, we plead, O Lord, to see the day of earth's redemption that sets your people free.*

In a world that wants to hurry everything up and make it more efficient and more seamless and more perfect, Advent carves out a space for us to pay attention to where we experience a lack of wholeness. If we look at our lives and our world and say, "This is not the way things should be," Advent says, "Let's not rush past that too quickly." Advent reminds us that longing is not ingratitude. Desire is not selfish. And lament is not complaining. Advent is a season of our longing after God and God's peace. When we pray, *Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come*, we're giving voice to that desire and that longing. We are paying attention to it. Looking at the ways in which we desire our world to be transformed and renewed.

And when we pay attention to that longing, to that desire, we discover that it is not simply we who long after God, but God who longs after us. That God enters into our midst again and again and again to renew and transform creation. When we recognize the gap between the world as it is and the world God intends, we discover again God's consistent desire to overflow into our lives and into the lives of our neighbors.

As we begin this Advent season together, I encourage you to make space for that longing, that desire, that wish for wholeness. Don't overwhelm it with distractions. Don't minimize it as whining. Don't write it off as pessimism. But remember that your longing, your desire, and your hope points the way toward the life of the world to come.

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