

Yr. B, Advent 1
November 29, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1156 Words

Lessons: **Isaiah 64:1-9**
****Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18****
****1st Corinthians 1:3-9****
****Mark 13:24-37****

The waiting is the hardest part, that's for sure. Most of us are just terrible at waiting...for this quarantine to end...for the already infamous 2020 to be over.

Come to think of it, we're not even all that good at waiting for trifling things—like the turkey to finally get done...or the fish to finally start biting...or a parking space to open up...or the leaves to stop falling.

Especially, we struggle waiting for the things that affect us most—for our grades to come in...for the job interviewer to finally call back...for the tests and surgeries and therapies to be behind us...for healing to come at last—for our bodies and souls, healing with our difficult relationships...healing for our nation...and for healing throughout the world.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down (Lord), so that the mountains would quake at your presence...” This is how Isaiah taught the people to pray...with boldness, not so much asking, but really *telling God how* we would like God to show up! #1 Now! And #2—with unmistakable power.

You see, the Israelites were not good at waiting, either. They were tired of waiting for things to get back to the way they remembered and loved. To be perfectly fair, *their exile*—unlike our time of separation—it was not measured in months or years, but in decades! And so, we can understand why the Israelites were so weary, so disillusioned, and so unsure how to wait *or pray* any longer.

They just wanted their cities back. They wanted their temple back. They wanted their lives back! They wanted *God* to come back...because it felt very much as if God had gone away.

Into this pregnant moment, Isaiah composes his passionate lament and plea to God. Two thousand five hundred years later, the prophet is still showing us how to wait and how to pray—not passively, but with “painful longing” for change and with “unwavering allegiance”¹ to the One who will bring it forth. “O that you would shred the heavens for our sake. You’ve done it before, O Lord. You can do it! You can do it, *again!*”

Isaiah is almost taunting, isn't he? I mean, would you *dare* to blame God for your sins? Isaiah does! He complains to God, saying: (It was) “*because* you hid yourself (that) we transgressed.”

Now, it's not that the prophet is teaching us to avoid our personal responsibility, but rather to remind God that we—*your people*—we are in this together with you, O Lord...we cannot do this without your love and mercy!”

“We are like faded leaves,” Isaiah writes. “(Brittle and brown and) blowing in the wind. We need you, Lord—*here, now!*”

Imagine pining away in silence, waiting decades for things to change. Imagine, vacillating between hope and despair, waiting for things to change. Maybe you don't have to imagine it. Maybe it's already real for you—a sense of fading like a leaf, the feeling of brittleness, that helpless feeling of blowing in the wind.

¹ William Brown offers an insightful description of active vs. passive waiting in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 1*, eds. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 3-7.

If that is the case, then I invite you, dear people, to lean in and hear the Good News. On this very special Sunday...the first day of a new week...the first day of a *new year*...the first day of the *Advent of our Lord*; we are invited to change our expectations for things to change.

Rather, the prophet, Isaiah, challenges us to change, as he did. Isaiah seems to change *his mind* about what he was looking for from God. He sets aside his passionate prayer for God's unmistakable power and might for a moment. He leaves behind his demands for earthquakes and fires and trembling nations. Isaiah lets go of his deep disappointments over God's persistent hiddenness, and he re-imagines other ways in which the unmistakable power of God might be known to us!

With one word—Yet—Isaiah suspends the way he used to *think about God* and wait for God and pray to God, and he re-imagines for a moment who God might actually be...and how change might actually come to take place.

“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father.” What if *Isaiah* is right? What if God is revealed *more clearly* to us as a loyal and loving parent? What if the unmistakable power we pray for is best revealed in the strong arms of a father's loving embrace of his child? Such parental dedication and love *has* the unmistakable power to help us change from the inside out...growing up from vulnerable, helpless children into fruitful, capable adults.

Isaiah continues: “And you, (O Lord,) are our potter.” What if Isaiah is right? What if God is revealed *more clearly* to us as a creative and patient artist? What if the unmistakable power we pray for is best revealed in the supple hands of a potter's steady embrace of her clay? Such artistic dedication and love *has* the unmistakable power to help us become fully formed from the inside out...transformed from useless mounds of earth into precious vessels of grace.

As we begin this new year of hope and expectation, I want to challenge you to be alert to more than the changes in the world. I also want you to pay attention to the changes taking place within you. Are you becoming better at waiting or not? Are you becoming more willing to seek the power of God, as passionately as Isaiah, or not?

How are we turning our painful longings for change and our unwavering allegiance to Christ into more fervent prayers of thought, word, and deed? Have the demands of these times made us more brittle like leaves blowing in the wind, or just maybe a little more malleable, like precious clay in our Potter's loving hands?

Guess what?! It's a new day...of a new week...and of a new year. Nobody but you gets to choose how you will see the unmistakable power of God at work within you. Nobody but you gets to choose whether (and how) you will let the loving embrace of God transform you from the inside out.

“It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his (or her) own work...” This is the Gospel story of God's faithfulness, entrusting servants like us to be in charge of the change we want to see in the world. This is Jesus' story of God's faithfulness, entrusting servants like us to become the fullness of who we have been created, embraced, shaped, molded, transformed, and tested to be. All of this unmistakable power belongs to you and me.

So, keep alert in this blessed, new year! Keep alert to all the different ways you might use (and share) this power you have... for the glory of God and for the love of neighbor.

Amen.