

Shadow and Light: Impatient Expectation

Isaiah 64:1-9

November 27, 2022

Ages ago, in the fall of 2020, when our younger son Benjamin was three years old and most activities were halted by the pandemic, our family would occasionally drive around. It was an activity that took up some time and got us out of the house. We would drive around in search of houses decorated for the season. We started in late September, when pumpkins and ghosts and giant spiders began to appear in the yards of our neighbors.

There was something about Covid and the pandemic effect on us that upped our game for outdoor decorations. I'm not sure exactly what the two had in common, but pumpkins and ghosts and spiders of every type appeared in the yards of our neighbors. And Ben—three years old—was on notice. As we explored the area, whenever we passed a decorated home, he would point and yell, "Hey, Dad, looks like somebody's getting ready for Halloween!" In late November, the ritual began all over again, this time with colored lights and snowmen and reindeer stationed in yards. "Hey, Dad, looks like somebody's getting ready for Christmas!"

I thought of Ben's hopeful proclamation all week long. Today, we begin the season of Advent. Christmas is on its way, and it's time to get ready. If I'm honest, a large part of me simply wonders where the time has gone. That boisterous three-year-old is now a full-fledged kindergartener—still impressed by the decorations, I'm glad to say. But my how time has flown. In a conversation earlier this week, I heard someone say, "It's not even December, and I'm already behind!"

There is no doubt we've entered the season of impatience. Swiftly these frenetic days pass by.

So, how are you preparing? What is on your list as we move into December this week? I can imagine that most of your preparations are very practical. After all, meals must be planned, presents must be purchased, trees must be decorated, travel arrangements must be made. We're all on the clock now in one way or another.

But here at Second Church, our hope is to prepare you in a different way. This year's theme, *Shadow and Light: A Journey into Advent*, is an invitation to reflect. To reflect on the sacred meaning of the season. To reflect on our own lives and the life of our community. This season brings a gentle reminder that what we need most is not one more obligation, not one more item on our to-do list. What you need—what I need—most is Christmas, pure and simple. The message of Christmas. We need to experience hope and peace and joy and love.

The season of Advent is how we prepare to receive those gifts, our annual affirmation that, at just the right time, God came into the world with no help from us. **Adventus**. The name means "arrival."

This morning, we remember that the waiting for God's arrival began in dense shadows of uncertainty and fear, when centuries before the birth of a baby boy in a borrowed Bethlehem stable, a prophet gave voice to the distant hope of a people exiled in the land of Babylon. Isaiah begins this season with urgency: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." There is a certain desperation in the prophet's voice. He writes from a place of captivity. Surrounding him, the holy places, the sanctuaries of his people, lay in ruins, the people of God displaced, dispersed, discouraged. Surrounded by shadows and shrouded in darkness, Isaiah speaks of God to a

people who have forgotten. The amnesia of exile has gotten the best of them. God's distance and absence produced the expectation of nothing new. Yes, they had given up.

As we begin this Advent journey, I want to acknowledge the reality that some of us find ourselves in the same place. You worship this morning alongside fellow travelers who are at the end of their rope, for whom God's voice feels distant, the memory of God's presence fading. Yes, there are ample reasons for hopelessness, even for surrender. In the world around us there is suffering. There is senseless violence. There are wars and rumors of wars. There is corruption and greed, selfishness and division. The lives and livelihoods of the most vulnerable are at stake. Tension is high. Attention to civility is low. The capacity for compassion is slipping from our collective grasp.

And then there are the struggles of our own lives—the brokenness, the sadness, the heaviness that we all encounter. As a friend of mine often says, "Everyone has something." Some struggle with the loss of a friendship, a relationship, a loved one. Some struggle with job security, the constant battle to make ends meet. Some struggle with stress. Some battle the demon of addiction. Some wrestle with isolation. Some find it hard to forgive, and some can't move beyond past mistakes.

All of us know the nagging fear of the unknown. What will the future hold? What will the test results show? How will the fragile balance of work and life hold? How can strained relationships last through these stressful weeks? Will there be enough to get through the year? Will we discover meaning and purpose? Everyone has something, and all of us bring everything to this shadowed season. We wonder if hope is anything more than a childish illusion. For the days are getting darker. Plastic reindeer and strings of colored lights fail to cover our cynicism for very long.

Every year, my heart is moved by an Advent prayer that begins, "In our secret yearnings, we wait for your coming, and in our grinding despair we doubt that you will!"¹ Do you know grinding despair?

Isaiah's people knew it. They knew what it was to be exhausted, afraid.

And yet. Somehow, the prophet summons the strength to give voice to the deepest yearnings of the human heart—the hope that God will return, tearing the heavens apart on the way down. Isaiah wants the full fireworks display; he wants colored lights on every house and yards full of flashy displays. He demands an unmistakable divine demonstration. He wants the mountains to shake, the voices to boom, lightning to flash. And I can relate. I want God to invade this mess we've made, to show up in a big way. I want God's voice to be heard unmistakably by all. I want the world to quake with the power of God as never before. I want the brokenness to be repaired. I want the guilty to be charged and convicted. I want justice in the world.

But *power* is not where the prophet concludes his proclamation. There is a shift from cosmic vision to personal relationship. There is a shift from dramatic disruption to the intimacy of love. There is a shift from shaking to shaping.

We are the clay, and you are the potter.
We are all the work of your hands.

In the end, it is not the conqueror but the creator for whom Isaiah longs.
We are all the work of your hands.

In the end, it is not the destruction of enemies but the creation of community that will light our way.
We are all the work of your hands.

This week, my family gathered for Thanksgiving in the sacred mountains of Montreat, North Carolina. Montreat is a place that means so much to my own spiritual journey and the place where I sense God's presence most strongly. On Wednesday afternoon, surrounded by the work of God's hands in that place, I was reminded that we are held, not by a frightening figure of judgment and anger who makes the mountains shake, but by the one who formed us and them. That we are deliberate creations of a divine artist. The beauty of those mountains tells me,

again and again, of a God who opens the heavens and comes down, not in fear-inducing rage, but in the tenderness of love.

O Lord, you are our Father. O God, you are the one who holds us when we do not know how to hold ourselves. O God, you are the one. You are the one who has chosen relationship over power. Who has chosen intimacy over intimidation.

And this is what I hope for in this season. I am hoping that God will come again in ways that stir my imagination and renew my soul. And I hope for all of us that we are not too filled, our lists are not too long, our hands are not too occupied to receive the gift God gives. That our hearts will be patient enough to be shaped by the one whose love has formed us.

For the promise of Advent is this: in the darkening shadows and shortening days, God is on the move. In the dramatic and the subtle, God is closing the gap between heaven and earth. When we are ready and when we are not, God comes close enough to touch. And if it is too much for you to believe this morning, at least hope to believe it. At least prepare for the possibility. At least immerse yourself in a community that proclaims it for you when your voice will not speak those words.

It was another time and place, but not so different from our own. Surrounded by shadows and the dark clouds that signaled the coming of the Second World War, the poet W.H. Auden penned powerful words. The title of the poem is an ominous date, "September 1, 1939," and it begins grimly.

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade.

But Auden closes with words of expectation, framed in beautifully intimate terms:

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

Looks like somebody's getting ready for Christmas.

In this season of impatience, when you are driven to rush, in the madness of a culture overcome by frenzy barely masking a deeper despair, you can be an ironic point of light, sharing messages of simple and profound truth.

O, God, you are our Father. We are all your people.
We are the work of your hands.
Keep those candles, those flames of affirmation,
burning. Hope is on the way.

ⁱ From "Advent Prayer" by Walter Brueggemann.