

2011 November 27

CA Grosch-Miller

*Isaiah 64: 1-9; Psalm 80; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37*

### *Occupy Advent*

The writers of our lections this morning, from the Isaiah prophetic tradition and the gospel community of Mark, struggled to reconcile the ancient stories of God's powerful presence with the present experience of God's absence. Each community was a community living under the weight of fear and discouragement. Isaiah's people had experienced the destruction of home and Temple, the disorientation of exile and a dispiriting return to a devastated land. Mark's community strained and suffered under Rome's boot, the 'desolating sacrilege' loomed, persecution of the nascent community had begun. They had either lived through the Jewish Revolt and witnessed the destruction of the second Temple or they heard the tramping of Roman soldiers at the city wall. Where was God? The world was going to hell in a handbasket. Why didn't God swoop down and clean up this mess once and for all?

The people waited for God.

Some days it seems too that our world is going to hell in a handbasket. The graffiti wall we put up in the city centre yesterday reveals the concerns: about the economy, about cuts to essential services, about the climate. In our time, rapacious greed has exposed our economic structures as morally bankrupt: speculation sets food prices, income inequality continues to grow, thousands are left without jobs and social services diminish. Climate change is accelerating: this month we learned that in 2010 global emissions of carbon dioxide jumped by the largest amount on record, a rise steeper than worst-case scenarios laid out by climate experts only four years before. We watch anxiously and wonder *what kind of lives will our children and our grandchildren have?* We smell threat; we know that the way we live now is unsustainable.

Do we wait for God?

Living in the scientific age, we are less expectant than the ancient Hebrews or the early Christian community that God would or could swoop down and clean up this mess. But we hold the same fierce longing in our hearts. We sense the theonomy of the situation – that it calls for the divine hand.

This is what we need to know to live in these times, to survive and thrive amidst challenge and change: **People wait for God, and God waits for people.** It is the divine-human connection, Word becoming flesh, that saves people and planet.

Desmond Tutu, drawing on the words of Augustine of Hippo in the 4<sup>th</sup> century says it this way: *Without us, God will not. Without God, we cannot.*

Getting the balance, though, is tricky. How many parts God and how many parts humanity are required by this recipe for salvation? What's the right ratio? Too much waiting on God and we miss opportunities. Time may be running out for our species, so missed

opportunities weigh heavily. Too little waiting for God and we risk doing the wrong thing for the right reasons or even the wrong thing for the wrong reasons. We are creatures, not the Creator: incomplete in ourselves, our knowledge is limited, our perspective skewed. How exactly may we **Occupy Advent** in the hope of getting the balance right, or at least not too badly wrong?

Here are my thoughts:

First, **Wait Watchfully**. And remember: we are waiting for Christ, not waiting for Christmas. In the rush and bustle of the season, the pressures to shop, cook, visit and more are enormous. Consumer capitalism does its best to keep us wanting and spending and filling up our homes and our time with stuff and activities. Sometimes we are asleep or deaf to the still voice that would lead us to the quiet place, where we might see our world anew, see the people around us and what they really need (which is likely to be time and love), and see what we ourselves can be. *Keep awake*, Jesus says.

Wakeful, watchful waiting requires internal quiet and focused attention moment by moment. Look for the signs. Budding leaves on a fig tree signal summer. What signs might we see about us that God is on the move, seeking to birth something new to bring hope and healing? How might we participate in this something new?

Second, **Worship Humbly**. It is worship that works the clay of our hearts, worship that enables the stillness of mind and peace of heart that makes for internal quiet. The last thing we need in this season is one more thing to do or, more likely, one more thing to feel guilty about not doing. So I'm not suggesting that you spend more time in church, subscribe to a podcast or buy another Advent devotional book (or in my case pick one off my own bookshelves that I've never managed to complete – though I'm hopeful this year that I will). Rather, I'm suggesting that, as we are able – perhaps first thing in the morning or last thing at night -- we tune our awareness to God, to the greatness and the power that is. And that, as we do that, we say *Here I am. I am yours, daughter/son of your love and your longing, clay in your capable hands. Mold me; Use me.* When you go home today, put a candle on your desk, an angel on your kitchen counter, something that will remind you day by day to pause, take a moment and say *Here I am*. Worship is self-gift, each of us unique in our strengths and in our limitations, each of us with something to contribute. Paul tells us that we – the community of faith -- are not lacking in any spiritual gift as we wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 1:7) Worship is the practice that liberates the gifts and opens the Way.

Wait watchfully; worship humbly, and finally, **Welcome Wonder**. One of the impoverishments of the Age of Science and Technology is a conviction of the fact-ness of truth, a fascination with empirical evidence and ambivalence towards mystery. Having freed ourselves from superstition and emotionalism, our capacity for imagination and for wonder are discredited and diminished. Yet imagination and wonder are tools of the Holy, world-revealers and world-shapers. I suspect the greatest scientists engage imagination and wonder, which gentle us into liminal space, the playful threshold between today and a better tomorrow.

Here our surrounding culture helps us – for what is Santa if not a wonderful exercise of imagination and is this not the season during which we are most likely to be caught up in wonder: the wonder on children’s faces and the surprise tear on our cheek as we witness the surprise of tender generosity. It is a season of wonder, and rightly so. For the wonder beneath it all, the wonder of Word becoming flesh, is the greatest wonder of all. And our welcome of it is what it is all about.

The little apocalypse we read from Mark’s gospel this morning begins big: the whole cosmos is implicated, sun and moon are eclipsed, stars fall from heaven and the order of the universe is shaken. The prophet’s cry in Isaiah calls forth the power that would spark a conflagration and cause nations to tremble. The painters’ brushstrokes are wide and wild, evoking the fullness of all that there is and the power which brought it into being and sustains it moment by moment. This power is not a figment of our imagination. God is not an obsolete concept in our modern world. Just as the ancients waited on God, so too do we. For we are as needful of that power and presence as they were, maybe even more.

We wait for God. And just as God waited on a handful of bedraggled returnees to rebuild a city, just as God waited on a motley crew of disciples once the shell shock of crucifixion and resurrection wore off, so too God waits for us. For without us, God will not. And without God, we cannot.

Advent is the season of waiting, for us and for God. May we Occupy Advent this year gently and persistently, waiting watchfully, worshipping humbly and welcoming wonder. And may Word become flesh again and again and again and again.

Amen.