

1st Sunday Advent B 17

December 3, 2017

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.
Amen.

I asked the confirmation youth the other night what they knew about Advent.

What did the season of Advent mean for them. One of the youth raised his hand and said; 'Advent means we get these calendars and each day you open them and you get a piece of chocolate. And some days there might be another surprise and at the end it means it is Christmas and you get presents!' He said all of this with joy and excitement and anticipation. In many ways he is right. At least his excitement and anticipation were properly pointed in the right direction, pointing to the arrival of Christmas, and the greatest gift of all the arrival of Jesus, God with us.

Advent is the season of anticipation, of waiting and watching for the arrival of the Messiah. It is about knowing the past as we look for the future while we await the signs that the future is about to take place.

These texts from Isaiah and Mark take us there. Isaiah is dealing with a people who are living in a reality that they did not expect and are looking to the past for hope that the future might be brighter. The people had returned from exile to their homeland, to the places of their youth and of their ancestors. Yet it was different than they remembered, different from the stories of the past. It was not as they expected so they are disappointed and feel that their God had forgotten them or had failed to return home with them.

They cry out, 'God, remember when you did awesome deeds that we did not expect? When you came down the mountains quaked at your presence?' They knew of the accounts of God acting on their behalf, of caring for them in the presences of their enemies. So they speak out to remind God that they are here, waiting for God to reappear. The passage ends with a sense of repentance and acknowledgement of their sinful ways seeking forgiveness.

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'For you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter: we are the works of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember our iniquity forever. Consider we are all your people.'

The people were looking around for the signs of the presence of their God and were not finding any. They thought the Lord had forgotten them and they wanted to reestablish past idealized ways of the past as they look for the future. It would come, but not in one moment, it would take time and work and faith on the part of the people.

This picture is not only the way they were in the past, but how much it reflects the way many live today. So many people struggle in this season of Advent, or as the culture calls it, the Christmas season. We all want the hallmark movie version of our lives, the Norman Rockwell picture of the family sitting around the table filled with food and the turkey plump and beautiful, cooked perfectly and all the family members happy and joyful. Then we look around only to believe that all we have does not measure up. This is where the scriptures help us to look toward the future that it will be brighter and full of joy, to live with hope as we await the arrival of the Savior.

Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is straight forward, working to prepare and offer hope to the disciples and his followers. In many ways Jesus is speaking to a reality soon to arrive with his arrest, death, burial and resurrection to a new life. When that takes place the fulfillment of the promise that he will come again to usher in a new kingdom, a new way of living, a new way of life. In the reading of Mark there is also the sense the writer is also offering a word of hope for the readers of his letter following the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70CE. Some 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Romans destroyed the Temple, the central focus for the Jews and early

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Christians. This forced them to think differently about their life and how the Lord their God was with them. After all without the Temple, god did not have a place, a home where they could come to meet him. Their ideal, their old way of understanding was gone and they needed to find a new way of living and experiencing God in their lives.

Here Mark reminds them of the words and promises of Jesus. *'the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory and collect the elect from the four corners of the earth.'* Knowing the people will be distracted and not looking as were they should be reminds them they will know the signs just as they know the signs of the arrival of summer by watching the buds on the branches of the fig tree. When you see the sun darkened, the moon not give light and the stars falling from heaven, then you will know the arrival of the Son of Man coming in the clouds. But don't expect to know the exact time or place or date when that will happen for no one knows. So keep watch, keep alert for the signs are around you.

Then Jesus as he so often does tells them all a parable. *'It is as if man going on a journey, upon leaving his home puts his slaves in charge, each with their tasks to do. Then commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch, so that the master might not find him asleep upon his arrival.'* We like the doorkeeper are to be awake, to be aware and keep watch.

Sir Ernest Shackleton on a expedition of the South Pole left a few men on Elephant Island, promising to return. Later as he tried to return to the island icebergs blocked his way. Suddenly as if by a miracle, an avenue opened up in the ice and Shackleton was able to get through. Hi men, ready and waiting, quickly scrambled aboard. No sooner had the ship cleared the island than the ice crashed back behind them. Contemplating their narrow escape he said to his men; 'it was fortunate you were all packed and ready to go.'

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They replied, 'we never gave up hope, whenever the sea was clear of ice, we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded each other, today might be the day he returns.'

Those men were not waiting to see the boat arriving, they watched the signs and stayed ready, not allowing themselves to be distracted, not giving up hope but remained focused on the promise of Shackleton's return.

We in our day often allow ourselves to be distracted by the world, by the culture which has lost hope or by the loss of the idealized past which we long for. The season of Advent comes to us as a reminder of the future which is at hand, knowing that Christmas day as we anticipate the arrival of God in human form, as God with us in the baby Jesus. Yet we continue to remain on vigil, waiting and watching for the signs which inform us that Christ is about to return as he promised, to usher in his new kingdom, his new way of living, his new way of life.

AMEN

T.G.B.T.G.

Pastor Michael