

## **“PREPARING THE WAY”**

### **1) “Wait For It!”**

**Isaiah 64: 1-9 / Mark 13: 24-37**

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And so it begins— Advent, the season of watching and waiting, this season of preparing the way for the One who comes. Perhaps you’ve noticed, but our culture hasn’t exactly embraced the idea of Advent or its message that proclaims our need to wait. Beginning about mid-October, the Christmas crush begins online and in our stores. By the time Thanksgiving rolls around, the push is in full swing. Black Friday has now become something of a holiday in and of itself and from here, it only gets worse.

Suffice it to say, that we aren’t exactly fond of the idea of waiting. We would just as soon “cut to the chase” and get to where we want to go. In a culture that is focused on “immediate gratification,” we so often find ourselves becoming impatient with the suggestion that there is any real value in taking the time to prepare, to wait, or to watch. That is simply too passive for us. We want action.

In our lesson from the Book of Isaiah this morning, we can clearly sense the impatience of the writer in the petition that he offers to God. The writer doesn’t want to have to wait— whether it is for God and for anyone else. This much is clear in the opening line of the passage: **“O that you would tear the heavens open and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence...”**

The writer wants God to act in a bold and decisive way to resolve the tension of a very uncomfortable situation. It is important to keep the historical context in mind. Persia, under King Cyrus, has defeated Babylon and thus, made it possible for those who had been exiled from Israel to return home to Jerusalem. But it was a homecoming that brought with it a certain tension—a tension between those who had stayed behind in Jerusalem and those who had been forced to live in Babylon.

After fifty years, those had been living in exile immigrated home. But it was hardly the home that they had remembered and hardly the reception that they had expected. Instead of being received with tears of joy, they were greeted with suspicion and fear—not unlike the reception that some immigrating peoples receive today in our world. As you might imagine, there was a lot of tension over the issues that arise when two distinct populations are trying to learn to live together.

That tension can be felt in the opening address of the writer and the plea for God to act in bold and decisive ways: **“Tear the heavens open and come down right now to deliver us and make things right!”**

Have you ever found yourself praying this prayer? I suspect that many of us have—especially in those times in which we feel overwhelmed by the challenges of living, the times in which we are struggling with conflict or the times in which we simply do not know which way to turn.

It is, I think, a very natural and normal prayer to pray—especially when our patience has worn thin. Rather than struggle any further, we would just as soon have God intervene and make things right once more.

I don't know if you've noticed, or not, but our God doesn't seem to operate according to those expectations. At least in my experience, God is not inclined to act like a Genie, summoned from a lamp to do whatever it is that we might command. Nor is God like a magician who waves a magic wand to grant our request.

For the record, God not comply with the prophet's request. God did not "tear open the heavens and come down" to fix Israel's mess. Instead, Israel would be forced to apply the teaching and the wisdom of its faith to the challenges of the present—and that would take time, patience and persistence.

So it often is with our own prayers and petitions to God. God is not likely to boldly intervene and make everything right. Instead, God invites us to draw upon the wisdom and the teaching of our faith as we take the responsibility to address the conflicts and the concerns that are before us. And this requires a willingness to watch and to wait as we look for the signs of God's activity in our world.

This is, I think, the essential message that is lifted up in our second reading this morning—the one that comes from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Mark—a chapter often referred to as the "little apocalypse." It was in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans that it appeared to many as if their world was coming to an end. Hence we have the apocalyptic imagery that is found also in the Book of Revelation—ominous imagery that suggests suffering and darkness and death.

This has rightly been termed, "crisis literature" that portrays a world in turmoil and conflict. Rather than focusing our attention on the wild imagery however, I would rather direct our attention to message of Jesus—a message that stresses the importance of waiting, of watching, of being awake to the ways in which God is already at work in our world.

When you place these two lessons side by side and consider their essential message, I believe that it is this: **While God does not operate at our beck and call to intervene and deliver us from the challenges and struggles of living, this does not mean that God doesn't care about us or the situation we face. It simply means that it is up to us to understand that ultimately, it is our job to wait and watch for the ways that God is already at work in our world and then, get in on the work that God is already doing.**

As many of you are aware, there's a popular expression that we often hear in everyday conversation. Originating in the sitcom, "How I Met Your Mother," it's a phrase that the

character, Barney Stinson (Neil Patrick Harris) uses to encourage his listener to “wait for it...” Now, as is so often the case, the real meaning of this phrase is found in the way it is delivered. If delivered properly, it invites a building sense of drama and a deepened feeling of suspense.

A simple sentence is interrupted with the invitation to wait for the completion of that sentence. For example, take the sentence, “Tonight is going to be legendary.” Rather than say it that way, you would add a little drama and suspense by saying, “Tonight is going to be legen—wait for it—dary.”

The language of Advent is language that suggests that our God is already at work in this world and that it is our job to “wait for it,” to watch for it and then, get in on the work that God is already doing.

That is your assignment for this season that is now before us. I would like to assign you the responsibility of being “on the look-out” for the signs of God’s activity in our world and then to team up with God to complete the good work being done. Will you do that? Will you spend the needed time to pray, reflect, watch and wait? If you do, I promise you this: You will not be disappointed. You see, God does some of God’s best work in us when we are willing to prepare ourselves to see and hear and feel the subtle movements of God’s Spirit.

Despite, the prophet’s plea, God will not tear open the heavens, come down and do it for us. That’s simply not who God is or what God does. But God can and God will work in and through those who are willing to wait and watch and be alert for the signs of God’s activity in our world.

In the old film, “O God,” starring George Burns as God and John Denver as a frustrated Super Market manager, there is a classic exchange between the two. A skeptical John Denver says to God: **“Well, if you’re God, how can you permit the suffering of this world? How can you permit the hunger and the violence and the injustice that we see everywhere around us?”**

George Burns (aka God) takes a puff on his cigar and simply says: **“Me permit it? How can you permit it?”** That’s really the question that we all must answer. How can we permit the violence, the injustice, the hunger, the hatred that has become commonplace in our world? Before you answer too quickly, however, there is wisdom in remembering this: **God is even now at work in our world, making all things—“wait for it”—new. Amen.**