

COME ON DOWN!

Texts: Isaiah 64:1-4
Psalm 80:1-3
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:32-37

I remember a cartoon from a magazine or newspaper that pictured God, in the stereotypical tradition of elderly, white-bearded man sitting on a throne surrounded by clouds. And God is clearly distressed, frustrated by his waning influence in the world, especially in the affluent, sophisticated West. God is complaining to a subordinate angel who is perched on a smaller, nearby cloud lower in height of course, to the place where God sits. God cries out to this angel, "I don't understand it. I'm omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient!" The angel patiently replies, "Apparently it's not enough anymore—nowadays you've got to have a website as well."

It's true that God has taken something of a backseat as regards serious human endeavors in recent times. Fewer and fewer persons who claim to be religious are anything like the active church-goer of the mid-20th century. Even where God is claimed to be at the forefront of motivation and inspiration, oftentimes God, or the image of God, is made to serve particular theological biases and narrow political vision. There is a dizzying plethora of Christian denominations, faith communities, unaffiliated fringe groups, house churches, and lunatic fringe cults all claiming to have insight (some claim unique and exclusive insight) into the will and ways of God. From the most serious student of theology to the person most untrained in the scholarly regimen of biblical examination, God is and remains a mystery apparently unavailable to mortal scrutiny; but to a large extent even the serious pursuit for answers and clues into the nature and presence of God has been set aside in our time for other prerogatives and priorities.

So, what about God? Well, perhaps God has no one but God to blame for this confusion, this historically fragmented, myopic, and now largely indifferent examination of the reality and nature of the Divine. After all, this kind of problem has existed for millennia, with people regularly appealing to God for some undeniable proof of God's being there, or here. Characters in the Bible representing different periods of biblical history reflect the same kind of frustration with God's apparent ignoring of the need for the world to experience some kind of universal revelation that would unite us all, if not in a common religious affiliation, then at least in some unified agreement that God is really there and we'd better take our spirituality a lot more seriously than just mouthing the words, "I believe in God."

Biblical people all grew up being told the stories related to their national epic, and many of those stories recounted a dramatic, even Rambo-like deity who routinely performed awesome deeds of divine derring-do, like sending miraculous plagues on Egypt in order to secure release of the Hebrews, parting the Red Sea to give them a shorter route to their destination, causing the waters to fall back and destroy the Egyptian army in order to cut off their pursuit of the escaping children of Abraham, guiding these Chosen People with a jaw-dropping pillar of fire and at night, and an equally impressive pillar of smoke by day; rumbling with holy Presence at the summit of Mt. Sinai as Moses received the tablets of the law, written by God's own hand.

These mighty deeds and more were etched into the shared memory of the people of Israel, and so in the subsequent years of their history, especially during hard times of oppression and exile, they cried unto the Lord to repeat some of those powerful events so as to affect their liberation. For example, the prophet Isaiah, in the passage read earlier, beseeches God:

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence . . . to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.”

Or consider these words from the writer of Psalm 80:

“You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth . . . Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

Such entreaties as these were not uncommon in the annals of biblical people, because apparently, in this respect at least, their times as persons of faith were similar to ours in that God’s presence was not like a blockbuster summer action movie, but rather something like a silent song whispered on the breeze, a presumed presence that was appealed to through faith and piety, and not through the personal witness of God’s awe-inspiring, faith-sustaining, miraculous deeds. And so, after the two and one-half millennia since these words were first written, we are still waiting and watching for God to rock this hurting, fragmented, dispirited world with something truly impressive, something bearing the unmistakable supernatural signature of Almighty God, that we modern people of faith might have some star to which to hitch our wagons of believing and, even more importantly, so that this broken world can change, can understand what we understand as the foundation of our faith as regards God’s authority and power. Something really, really, outstandingly impressive like, oh, I don’t know, the end of the world?

For many biblical people, and for not a few Christians today, that is precisely the event that they eagerly anticipate, routinely predict, and robustly employ to inspire faith and discourage departure to the left or the right from the straight line of Christian orthodoxy. To hear someone make yet again another prediction that the apocalypse is about to occur occasions adolescent eye-rolls and dismissive shaking of heads, but I guarantee you that this particular religious cottage industry will not go away any time soon. And a year from now, as the widely publicized date of December 21, 2012 approaches, the date when the ancient Mayan Calendar predicts the end of one age and the beginning of another, there will be a veritable saturation of various predictions, preparations, and beatings-of-the-collective-chests regarding what is going to happen as we wait for that auspicious date to arrive.

Isn’t that what Advent is all about? Waiting for God to act decisively, watching for God to intervene impressively, anticipating that God will enter human history undeniably at least one more time to restore the wounded Creation, execute justice, and establish peace in the world?

This is my tenth Advent Season with all of you here at Northminster, and for the nine previous entries we have made together into this special time I have labored to bring to you what I consider to be a biblical understanding of Advent, and although God is Sovereign and, of course, free to act as God wills, and realizing that God could well orchestrate the end of all things, I nonetheless believe the biblical record is clear that predicting this event, whatever it is to be, is not how people of faith are to spend their time during their moments of history here on the earth. They are to wait, yes, for God to act, bringing fullness to God’s plan for the redemption of the world and healing to Creation. They are to watch, yes, for signs that God is near, that the waiting will come to an end and the longed for, hoped for Reign of God will finally fully emerge. They are to hope and anticipate, yes, that God’s will is accomplished and that the lion will lie down with the lamb, that the spears will be hammered into plowshares, and that none will hurt or destroy in God’s Creation ever again.

If we want to call that the end of the world, fine, names are really irrelevant in terms of trying to describe what God is doing and is to do, but one other thing seems to be pretty clear, at least it was clear to Jesus, God's Son, who said:

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come."

Beware. Keep alert. Keep watch. Be prepared. All these words and phrases seem to indicate that we shouldn't dismiss or ignore the phenomenon of Jesus' return or God's final intervention into human history, but also that we shouldn't waste time trying to predict when it will happen. Jesus says he doesn't even know when this event, whatever it is to be, will arrive, so isn't it just a tad bit presumptuous on our part to think we can know what the Son of God himself admitted he could not?

The teaching of Jesus is that we shouldn't be predicting; we should be waiting intentionally and with purpose. The teaching of Jesus is that we shouldn't spend precious time discerning the indiscernible; but that we should be preparing. The teaching of Jesus is that the Christian enterprise is not about seeing into the future, but leaving the future in God's good hands while we concentrate on the present. Advent is about a special kind of waiting that effects our behavior in the here and now, that prepares for the return of Jesus by being about, with discipline and urgency, the work that he left for us to do in this world, work for the world's people, and for one another. How else are we to interpret the analogy Jesus uses in the passage read earlier from the Gospel of Mark regarding Jesus' return:

"It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly."

Jesus has left us, his committed disciples, in charge of ministering to and actively loving this world until his return. And he didn't charge us with predicting when that would be, or what it would look like. He said watch, keep alert, live your lives as those who are in high expectation of something wonderful which is about to happen. And in the meantime, do the work that I have left you to do.

Isaiah the prophet also recognized this posture of faith, let's call it the Advent posture, and how it relates to working in the world when he wrote:

"From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him."

Here is suggested one of the paradoxes of Advent: that the One for whom we wait, and who has assigned us to be busy doing the work left for us, is at the same time already here, also working, working with us, beside us, for us, fulfilling his promise to his disciples as he left them on earth with these words, "I am with you always to the close of the age." It is the reality that we read throughout the Advent prophecies that the One for whom the biblical people are waiting has the name "Emanuel", which means, God is with us.

St. Paul reinforces this Advent description by sharing this amazing affirmation: that God has given us practical tools, spiritual resources to do the world-changing, life-affirming work that Jesus left for us to do:

"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, . . . in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind . . . so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord

Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The day of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is what Advent People wait for. But we are not to wait idly, or fritter away precious moments trying to predict when it will arrive. Instead of waiting for God to theatrically appear with fireworks and special effects instead of watching for God to give us hints and helps to determine Christ’s return, instead of asking God, as did the prophet Isaiah, to come down and impress the world, Advent encourages us ask God to “come in”, to be present with us and within us, so that working together with God we may do our parts to complete the work God has given us to do as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And while we are working, while we are changing the world through love and forgiveness and compassion and working for justice and peace, and advocating for the marginalized and the left-out and the left-behind, while all this is happening we wait, and we watch, and we hope that the fullness of time will come, and our work will be at an end, and an eternal Christmas morning will at last arrive. This is Advent faith and we are Advent people.

AMEN.