

1st Sunday of Advent (Year B)

Isaiah 64:1-9

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
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.
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.
You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
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 all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.*

Mark 13:24-27

*'But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.
Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the
angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

'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. 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. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Whew! What a week! In the past seven days, I have visited New York City with Tricia and my Mom, seen a Broadway show, driven to Montauk, gone on a supply run to Riverhead, celebrated Tricia's birthday, worshiped with folks at St. Mary's for the ecumenical thanksgiving service, cooked and carved a turkey for the first time in my life, taken down the fall decorations and replaced them with Christmas ones, cleaned more dishes than I knew we owned, spent more time shopping on amazon.com than I care to admit, and then I wrapped up the weekend with a refreshing dip into the waters off Crescent Beach.

Now, your week may not have looked exactly like that but I imagine the frantic pace of it is familiar to many of us. Santa has arrived at the end of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade to announce to us that the marathon roller coaster between now and December 25th has begun! The Black Friday sales are still going! Cyber Monday is only a few hours away. And the family visits, the decorating, the present wrapping, the cooking and cleaning and the program, parties, and concerts are approaching rapidly. It is that time of year again to gird our loins, stay hydrated, and hang in there because it's gonna be a crazy ride!

And amid all of this craziness we celebrate the beginning of a new church year with the season of Advent which calls us all together to..... wait!?

So, that's what we're gonna do...starting...now!

(pause in silence for 26 seconds)

Do you feel how awkward that was?

That was 26 seconds! And we're called to do this for the next 26 days?!

Waiting is not easy - especially this time of year!

I mean, wouldn't it be so much more convenient if the season of Advent, this season of prayer, preparation, and penitence, this season of *waiting* were in some other time of the year - perhaps January or February? After all, I hear that that is the time of the year when most Shelter Island residents like to hunker down and wait out the cold weather. Sounds like a pretty good time to practice a season of prayerful waiting. It just makes more sense.

However, we are called to keep alert and to watch, to wait for the coming of the Lord at precisely the one time of the year that it seems most counterintuitive to do so. After all, there are too many cantatas to sing, too many gifts to purchase, too many miles to be driven and flown, too many things to be done in too little time. As the weeks between now and Christmas pass, many of us might start thinking of

December 25th less as the arrival of Jesus Christ but the welcome departure of every exhausting thing that preceded it. As the tasks pile on, we want Jesus to hurry up and get here! I have a colleague who is a choir director at a very large church and amid the frantic pace of Advent, between the cantatas and the candlelight services, and the staff meetings, he can often be found running up and down the church halls muttering “push, Mary, push!”

Waiting is not the most intuitive thing to do. In fact, earlier this week, when I was considering whether or not to have that awkward 26 second pause earlier in the sermon, I thought to myself, “do I really want to *waste* 26 seconds of my sermon saying nothing at all?” I’m just as guilty as the rest of us when I am tempted to think of waiting as a wasteful thing.

But the waiting we are called to do in Advent is anything but wasteful. This is because the waiting that we are to do is in response to the work that God is doing in the world. While we may think that we are being productive with everything on our to-do lists, God is preoccupied during this season with a to-do list that trumps anything we could muster.

Today’s passage from Isaiah reminds us that in this season of Advent, God is on the move! Listen again to the prophet’s words:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil - 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. 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.”

In this season of Advent, may we be reminded that as we wait for God, God works for us. Likewise, today’s Gospel passage from Mark reminds us to keep alert and then tells us not once, but twice to keep awake! For God is doing something that we quite likely will not expect!

And here I cannot help but wonder if you and I do a better job of expecting Christmas than we do expecting Christ. We know what Christmas will bring, we do it year after year. Perhaps since we know what to expect from Christmas we have become numb when it comes to expecting the unexpected from Christ.

And so, the time has come to wait, watch, and wonder.

You and I are called to wait. To relax. To sit. To be quiet. For some of us, this is easy. For others it sounds like cruel and unusual punishment. But the fact remains that unless we take the initiative to open a space for quiet reflection on how God is moving in our lives, that movement will go unnoticed.

You and I are called to watch. To listen. To keep alert. To keep awake. This just might mean ignoring the christmas commercials whose products yell “look at me!” and turning our attention to why we even bother celebrating the birth of Christ year in and year out.

Finally, you and I are called to wonder. To imagine. To allow our curiosity to get the better of ourselves. To use the language of today’s passage from Isaiah, in order for ears to hear and eyes to see - they have to be OPEN! May this season of Advent invite our imaginations to stretch their wings a little bit as we ponder the possibilities of Christ’s eruption into our busy lives.

Now, I imagine at least one of you is wondering when this young preacher is going to insert some practical applications into this delightfully theological and philosophical sermon. The question inevitably arises: “well how *do* we wait and watch and wonder.” First of all, I must admit that each one of us achieves this in different ways: for some in quiet prayer before breakfast, for others a nice quiet walk, for others perhaps a daily devotional or scripture reading, or still others simple silence. However, if you are looking for a good place to start I invite you to set apart 30 minutes - just 30 minutes - and to come right back here to this room at 5:00 P.M. for the next four Tuesdays. I invite you to join us for a very casual, half hour prayer gathering where we will gather to read scripture, pray together, and perhaps even wait for the presence of the Holy Spirit in silence (perhaps even for longer than 26 seconds). I invite you to join me as we come together and - for a wonderful 30 minutes - you and I will set aside a few minutes to stop preparing for Christmas and to begin preparing for Christ. Bring yourself, bring a friend, bring the family - just don’t bring your to-do list...that can stay at the door.

Now, whether you are able to join us for this period of preparation or not, it is my prayer this day that this season of Advent be a time for your heart to be renewed, your spirit recharged, and your soul awakened to the presence of God during this blessed wait.

And so, may the wait begin as together we pray, “come, o come, Emmanuel!”