

A Tiny Tear
Isaiah 64: 1-9 and Mark 13: 24-37
First Sunday of Advent...November 29, 2020
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

October 27, four days before Halloween, I pulled into the Shell station in Seagoville. I stepped out of the car to get gas, and what did I hear? I heard *Do You Hear What I Hear*, Christmas music streaming from the outdoor speakers. This, before Halloween costumes, candy, trick or treat bags were shipped off to the discount aisles to make room for fall wreaths and porcelain pilgrims, and heaven forbid, Christmas decorations! But you know what? In previous years it would make me sad that we were rushing into what is already a frenzied season, Christmas. So often we miss the permission to slow down and reflect that Advent gives us.

But I cannot lie. Instead of being sad because of the rush, I felt a sad longing for the world to come together to the peace we know in Jesus, the Christ-child. And something tells me I am not the only one who feels this way. We truly need CHRISTmas in our lives right now!

Webster's dictionary defines longing this way: a strong desire or craving, especially for something that is unattainable. A hankering, hunger, itch, a thirst for, a yearning Advent, the liturgical season that begins today invites us to find peace, not sadness, in our longing.

The prophet Isaiah is speaking for the people suffering in exile. They are longing for something the world cannot give them. They long for God in their lives again. They cry out for God, in power and strength, to save them.

Advent, in contrast to the hype of the secular celebrations, comes with no colorful circulars or TV promos. Advent arrives with the color, purple. With haunting music. It comes with the need for God to enter our lives, the need to remember the promise of salvation. As Christians we long to hear the story of the child who came to re-orient, to re-focus, to save us. The season of Advent has been likened to waiting in the lobby before a symphony begins. Advent is an in-between place where we are bold enough to name what we long for, the peace that comes with the gift of salvation.

Our readings today share the very real, human experience of the absence of God. "Where are you God? O that you would tear the heavens and come down." Isaiah cries out for his people, captives in Babylon, wondering where on earth has God gone. "You have not shown yourself in a long time, God. You have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity." Translation: we have made a human mess of things, God, but are you going to let us wallow in our mistakes forever?"

Have you been there? In what seemed a dark, hopeless place with no idea of how to get out of it on your own, fearing that God was absent? Have you ever grieved over the loss of that which once was good and is now no more? Then, you identify with Isaiah.

But Isaiah is not just longing for himself or his people, he is longing for God to come to the whole world. Sound familiar? Like the prophet, we pray for our broken world. “O that you would tear the heavens and come down and save us from ourselves. Perhaps we are getting what we deserve, God, but we long for you to remember that we are your people. You are the potter, we the clay. Remold our minds, restore the future of your desire.”

As Christians, we can identify with the helplessness, loneliness, the frustration of the prophet so long ago; but the Advent season has room for much more than anxiety. The Christian story is one of hope and trust. It is the story of how God answers our deepest longings and needs. Jesus came, not with the expected trembling of the earth and falling of the stars, but in the quiet of the night, surrounded by parents, a few shepherds, some four-legged creatures. The earth did not appear to change at his birth.

Then forty years later, when Mark’s gospel was written, the world still seemed the same. Nero was persecuting Christians. Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple in ruins. Once again, the people were anxious, wondering what had happened to the promise God had made to set things right and repair all that was broken. They longed for the Savior they had once had but was now gone. Mark’s gospel reflects the longing of the early church, but it is also laced with the promise that those who are in distress should be hopeful; for the Lord is coming again.

The real, and really Good News, salvation has already come to the world! How are we embracing it?

Our gospel reading is about hope. To the people on the verge of concluding that nothing is ever going to change, Mark says, “Hold on! God is on the move, heading toward us. We will have to live in our human mess forever. The dark forces of the world will not have the final word.

And Jesus says to keep looking at the fig tree, looking for the leaves it bears in season. It is a sign of change, a sign that the kingdom is not far off. The message of Advent: Do not live in the season of barrenness, as if all were dark and dead. Keep awake. Long for that which has been promised and fulfilled and will be fulfilled again. The healed relationship that we so long for with God is attainable. For there is nothing in heaven, on earth or in all of creation that will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

So, how do we live in the in-between, in the lobby of the symphony hall? We hold hope in God. The power of God’s redeeming love intervenes in the human heart and spirit and can make all things new. This is important and a word of great hope for us. God is not creating new things, tossing out the old. God is shaping what God created into another vessel, another chance. How pliable will we allow our spirits to be in the hands of the Potter?

We cannot make our own hope too small! God’s salvation is not just for us, it is for the ends of the earth. So, in the in between time, we hope in God and we keep on longing. Through the

Christ child, a reconciled, mended relationship with God is attainable. The peace that the world cannot give is attainable.

Pray longingly for that relationship, for our prayers are the pathways where the Spirit of the living God travels into our hearts. And trust that, in the in-between time, we do not have to worry about predictions of when Christ will come again. We live trusting that his Spirit has never left us.

Unfortunately, I often come to the Advent season with my mind already too quickly turning to the new year. Organizing the calendar. How will the church year interplay with our personal lives? Do I have all the important dates, like session, communion, holy days identified so I can plan them and plan around them? The mind almost becomes frantic as the little squares fill in. This year, I refuse to do that. If I allow myself to panic and feel like I have to make up for a year in which we missed so much, on top of the year to come, let us just say that none of you, and especially Gary, could not tolerate me!

In a moment of being still before God, this awakening: For all the good planning I so, there simply are things we should not be organizing. If we are so focused on the calendar squares, the to-do lists, the endless repetition of what we expect of ourselves and others, we find ourselves awake to the ways of the world, but asleep to the movement of the Spirit that embraces us in unexpected ways, places and people. We do not know when unexpected joy is going to show up. We do not know when my path will cross with that of a stranger and be blessed by the experience.

We do not know when an experience in life will cause us to draw closer to God or when there will be an opportunity for us, with God's guidance, to deepen someone else's faith. We need to keep awake to the presence of the Spirit because the important things of life are often unpredictable. They happen in God's way, God's time. And it is God's way and time that I am longing for, because in God, the world will find the good and peace that is attainable.

So, how do we, stay awake to God's partnership in our lives? We do as Jesus tells the servants in the story. As disciples, we go about the work that Jesus has called us to do. We bind up the broken-hearted, teach by word and deed, we serve Christ in our everyday, ordinary, and extraordinary tasks, even as we pray for a new heaven and earth.

May we keep awake, for every moment is alive with a longing for God's promised presence and peace that is not only attainable, it is already here because on a night, long ago, God created a tiny tear in heaven's floor and slipped a baby into a manger. His name...Emmanuel, God with us. Amen