

Hope in the Darkness

- [Isaiah 64:1-9](#)
- [1 Corinthians 1:3-9](#)
- [Mark 13:24-37](#)

Welcome to Advent - today is the first Sunday of the church's year. And welcome to the first paradox of the year. Today's key word as we lit our Advent wreath was "Hope" yet the hope in these readings seems hidden in a description of human difficulty. I have mentioned before that my brother, an Anglican priest, faithfully sent out a Christmas letter each year in which he talked about normal things like the achievements of his children, but always decried the state of the world and said for sure the end of the world would be upon us before he wrote another letter... He was a disciplined man so perhaps he wrote his letter on the 1st Sunday in Advent after reading and preaching on these lessons...

Because at first blush it's difficult to find the hope. We all have times like that. There are dark times personally and collectively. This is one of them. The number of deaths nationwide are going up and up, infection rates are spiking, even here in Los Osos, and we are suffering from the effects of isolation and the economic downturn it brings and fearful for the future. This Thanksgiving was difficult for many of us and Christmas does not look much better as we cannot gather for parties or festive meals and music.

We all want to focus on the lighting of the candle, on the coming of hope, but our faith tradition can be brutally realistic. It does not allow us to ignore the difficulties of human life and sinfulness. It does not allow us to say that all is well without also acknowledging the pain and suffering. Yet both are true. And therein lies the paradox, and the hope.

All three of our readings this morning bring hope in the middle of difficulty.

Let's look a little more closely at the first reading from Isaiah.

This is in three parts.

First, the prophet addresses God saying "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down", and goes on to remind us that our God is deeply relational and "meets those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways." The second part starts with that little word "But" and continues with a description of the separation of God and man caused by sin. Then the third part reminds God that we are God's creation, the work of his hands and begs that God not stay angry with us.

This is I think, a wonderful summary of the history of our human relationship with God. We know that God is the powerful Creator whose presence is so awesome even the mountains quake and yet that living, powerful God is interested in a relationship with us. In fact, God actively seeks a relationship with us, but we have to choose it as well. This is an unusual feature – most gods of ancient mythology did their own thing with little regard for humanity, but our God is different. Isaiah says, "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."

So God chooses to be close with humans and longs for us to “wait for him”. There’s a link there to the Gospel reading where Jesus says, “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.” Wait for him, keep awake. But I digress.

Isaiah says, “no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.” Waiting for God is an active process, it’s not like waiting for a bus or waiting for a doctor’s appointment; waiting for God is actively opening yourself to God and creating the space in which God can act. Because God does not force Godself on us. That just isn’t who she is. Prayer is waiting. Meditation is waiting. Consciously intending that God will be the guiding center of your life is waiting.

But what gets in the way of that? The big But is of course sin and in a kind of circular argument we can define sin as that which separates us from God. Sin stops us being open to God’s working in our lives. Sin makes us impatient, sin believes that the universe rotates around me and my ego. When sin is in the way it doesn’t matter how “good” we are. As Isaiah says, “all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth” Why? Because God has hidden his face from us. When we are not walking with God, when we are not open and waiting for God, it doesn’t matter how hard we work or how much we give, it is all empty.

Now here comes the good news, the hope of Advent. Paul gives it to us in the second lesson, “God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” God has incarnated in Jesus, and in so doing has bridged the gap between God and human so that, though the gift of new life in Christ, our sinful natures are transformed and we are called into fellowship. God has heard the cry of Isaiah “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” and God has done it. No longer need we beg God to change and to come to us. It has already happened.

Now sin can no longer prevent us from waiting on God. Sin can no longer prevent us from keeping awake. When we hear God walking in the garden in the cool of the evening we need not be ashamed because we are clothed in Christ.

The answer to the darkness of our times is in our *inner* light. The light that grows and grows as we wait for God.

Helen Keller famously said, “+Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it. My optimism, then, does not rest on the absence of evil, but on a glad belief in the preponderance of good and a willing effort always to cooperate with the good, that it may prevail.” We might change her wording a little to say “My optimism... does not rest on the absence of evil but on a glad belief in the preponderance of good and a willing effort always to cooperate with God, that it may prevail.”

Keller’s optimism corresponds to our hope. Yes the world is full of suffering, but it is full also of the overcoming of it. Since we are in Christ we are part of the overcoming. By waiting upon

God, we ourselves are transformed and so the little bit of the world around us is transformed and suffering is acknowledged but overcome by the love of God.

We do not need to plead with God like Isaiah did, “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 forever. Now consider, we are all your people.” We do not need to plead like this because we know that God is not angry and that we are indeed God’s people.

We are the clay, God is the potter. Let us pray that as we wait for God we may be molded and transformed and made into lamps which make the light shine. That the light of Christ shining through us may be the light in the darkness which humanity and the whole of creation so sorely need.