

**“The Road to Bethlehem: What Are We Longing For?”**

Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
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*First Sunday of Advent*

*Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:30-37*

The season of Advent begins today - and with it our four week journey to the stable in Bethlehem. Liturgically, we begin our trip, as we begin every Advent, not with remembrances of the circumstances immediately preceding Jesus' birth, but with texts that express a longing for the world to change and point to a future when God's promises, expressed in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, come to full fruition.

Our first text comes from the 64<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah. Many scholars believe that this particular portion of the book was composed sometime after the people of Israel had returned from their years of exile in Babylon - after they had been repatriated, after they had come back from being uprooted from all that was familiar to begin again. Starting over was hard work. They faced many challenges. They were prone to malaise. The difficulties of life didn't just disappear.

Hear now the longing in Isaiah's prayer, spoken on behalf of a people who feel frustration, exhaustion and guilt. Note how the prayer turns at the end to an affirmation that even though they believe God has hidden God's face, they remain convinced that God, their potter, is their only hope.

*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 forever.  
 Now consider that we are all your people.*

Our second passage is from the Gospel of Mark, the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter. Here, as in Matthew and Luke, Jesus predicts an apocalyptic event - an event in which the Son of Man, most probably he, himself will return - an event that will come before the generation that first heard his words passes away. Some 2,000 years later, we are still waiting for this event to occur. Over the centuries, Christians have handled this in a variety of ways, including writing books making predictions about when this will happen. Looking back on the history, it seems pretty clear that some of what Jesus seems to predict did in fact unfold with the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. What I carry away from this text is not a blueprint for or prediction of the future so much as a sense of urgency, a call to be on the lookout for God breaking in to history, including in the here and now. Listen now to its words.

*'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.'*

Friday morning I awoke to news that the night before, at a Wal-Mart in California, a woman had pepper sprayed fellow shoppers in a 10 p.m. rush to make sure that she got to the new X Box 360s before anyone else. Elsewhere, a man was murdered in a department store parking lot by someone who robbed him of the things he had just purchased. By the time Black Friday ended, there were incidents of shopping related violence in at least eleven different states; and those events were just the ones that were noteworthy enough to make the news. That's not counting all of the harsh words, the hurt feelings, the tussles over items in the aisles, and the dog-eat-dog bickering over stuff that never made it into the glare of the media spotlight.

Speaking of pepper spray, we have also been treated in the past week or two to the image of non-violent protestors being sprayed point blank with that noxious stuff by police trying to disband

the gathering of a movement. Whatever you happen to believe about the Occupy Wall Street movement and its spin offs across the country - and there are a variety of different views on it, I know - I trust you will agree with me on two things. First, that some of the methods being used to disband the protestors has gone too far, and second, that, for better or worse, the movement expresses the discontent of a portion of our society at how they perceive that the world is tilted so that some people avoid financial and legal consequences while others get the book thrown at them. Even bringing this up in a congregation that by and large has benefited from the way the world is arranged (and while the stewardship results are still not all in, by the way) seems unwise. But to avoid mentioning it at all - to traipse merrily on by saying, in effect, "Move along, there's nothing to see here" - in a sermon on the longing that all of us bring to Advent, seems worse than unwise. It seems unfaithful. Unfaithful to the call a preacher receives to address the world head-on as it is, and as it could be.

Whatever else Black Friday shopping violence and the laborers, students, teachers, firemen, Iraq war veterans, and others protesting in parks across the nation speak to, they speak to a discontent, a hunger. What drives people to rush the doors to save money on a gaming system or a two dollar waffle iron? And seriously, what makes someone set aside the time and energy to take part in a protest, any protest? The answer to both of those questions is centered in a longing for something more.

I don't ever participate in the Black Friday madness - I'd rather take that precious time to enjoy my extended family well out of the shopping fray, thank you - and I have not spent any time protesting with the Occupy folks, but I can relate to the longing for something more that drives both of them. I think it is more than a longing for something more, I think it is a longing for Someone more.

It was longing that drove the prophet Isaiah, some 500 or more years before Christ, to say, "*O, that you would rend the heavens and come down!*" Oh that you would make everything right, that you would clean up our messy lives that you would shape us like a potter. It is a longing that has led generation after generation of Christian people to keep awake, looking for signs that Christ's kingdom might be breaking into our world. Augustine said, "*Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until we rest in Thee.*"<sup>1</sup> We try to fill that deep longing in our lives with all sorts of things and activities, but it is that connection to who (and Whose) we are *at our core* that brings us rest.

So this Advent, pay attention to your deepest longings - not for stuff, but for something more... What do you long for? And how might the God of embodied love, fleshed out in Jesus Christ and through his Spirit in us, in people like you and me, address that longing? How might Christ's love embodied actually give rise to longing?

Maybe on the heels of this Thanksgiving, what you are longing for more than anything else is *peace*. Perhaps it was another rocky year around the family Thanksgiving table for you and your parents or your siblings or your children. Judith and I laughed out loud as were listening to Garrison Keillor as he shared his weekly story from Lake Wobegon last night. You know Lake Wobegon: the place where all the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average. He was telling of a mother, calling her son, wanting a "do-over" on Thanksgiving after she'd embarrassed his date to the point that she ran out of the house in tears. Now our family got along well this Thanksgiving, no problems here. But I know that there are too many families who didn't.

Maybe you are more in touch with a desire for peace in the world this year than ever before. You have family and friends in the military; you despair at the seeming ascendancy of militant Islamists; you know firsthand the complexity of international relations. The work of international relations is not easy. It is very complicated, the way nations and people interact. You know how difficult that is. And yet there is something in you that longs, this year, more than ever before, for real peace.

Maybe what you long for is *time*. More time to spend doing the important things, more time for prayer, meditation, more time with family, and less on the busyness of the season. Know as you feel and address that longing that you do, in fact, have a certain degree of control over what you spend your time on. You have choices when it comes to how you spend your time.

Maybe what you long for this year is *justice*. A world that really is more fair and equitable, where hard work pays off for everyone, and not just for a few. If so, then perhaps, you'll relate to the double photo I saw on Facebook some time ago. One frame showed protestors in NYC, the next showed starving children somewhere in Africa. The caption was, "When you win your struggle, remember that to the rest of the world, you are the 1 percent."

We have so much longing that we bring with us to Advent this year, longing that we carry with us on the road to Bethlehem. We try to fill that longing in any number of ways, not all of them healthy. There are workaholics, sexaholics, alcoholics, and addicts of all sorts, trying to fill that God-shaped hole in their hearts. But Augustine is right. Our hearts are restless until they rest in the love of God.

J. Philip Newell in his recent book, *A New Harmony*, talks about the longing that all of us bring to life in terms of a phrase that Julian of Norwich coined. She claimed that all of us have at our core a love-longing: a longing for unity with God and with one another.<sup>2</sup>

In the book, Newell speaks of meeting a Jewish man from New Jersey, and how they shared together some of the most important moments of their lives.

The man remembered how, as a boy growing up in a Hasidic community in New York, he used to spend his summers at a camp for Jewish boys just outside the city. On one occasion, word got around that the rebbe, the much-loved rabbi of their community, was downstream from the camp and that he wanted to see the boys. They rushed down to the riverside to find the rebbe. And there he was standing in the middle of the stream rocking back and forth, in mantric motion, or in what the Jewish mystics call "one-pointed concentration" - focusing on the heart of the moment as the place where God is to be found, at the heart of every moment. (That is where God is to be found.)

The boys joined the rebbe in the river. He said only one thing to them. "The water that we see flowing past us now will never flow past us again." He then returned to his rocking movement of prayer. And the boys too began to rock in prayer. But the combination of the flowing water and the rocking movement of prayer put the young boy to sleep. When he woke up, all the other boys were away, but the rebbe was holding him with one arm as he continued to rock in prayer. This time the rabbi did not say anything. He simply looked into the boy's face and smiled. And in the rebbe's face the boy glimpsed the face of the One. The rebbe's face was like an icon, a

window, into the divine. It was a way for this young boy to remember who and Whose he was.<sup>3</sup>

In the busyness of this Advent remember that the water that we see flowing past us now will never flow past us again. So look for the face of God, the presence of God. It is all around us.

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*.

<sup>2</sup> John Philip Newell, *A New Harmony: The Spirit, the Earth, and the Human Soul* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), prologue, page xxi.

<sup>3</sup> Newell, pp. 50-51.