

ALL GOD'S PEOPLE!¹
Isaiah 64: 1-9
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Transitions are never easy, and the transition into the new liturgical year and the beginning of the season of Advent is no exception. I could almost hear the thoughts of people as we saw the first Advent candle being lit: "What? Already! But I'm not ready for this!" Yet here we are at the first Sunday of Advent whether we are ready or not.

This transition involves not just a change of topics, but also a change of mood. I have often thought that to be faithful in the interpretation of a biblical text we must be faithful not only to the content, but also to the mood of the text. Well, different seasons have different moods, and to be faithful to the season of Advent requires attention to the mood of Advent.

I

And what is that mood? It is a mood of perplexed longing and ultimately of hope that God will intervene and make something of the mess we have made of the world. My concern is to help provide a place within the community of faith to think together about where we are in history, and whether or not we really want or need God to break in with help.

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For a religious faith that holds these ancient scriptures in reverence, we are in a bit of an embarrassing situation. Most of these writings that we speak of as %holy+ were written from the perspective of an oppressed and often subjugated people. A people dominated by other world powers wrote them. We, on the other hand, find ourselves in the early years of the third millennium as part of the dominating world power. We all know that things look different from the position of power. It is a challenge for us, who are playing starring roles in the world drama, to recreate the mood of those Advent texts written by people who were playing bit parts, walk-ons, and fillers in the great world drama of earlier centuries.

For example, I am not at all sure that we can relate well to the opening of the Isaiah text for today, in which the writer pleads for a divine intervention in the world situation:

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence...
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!*

Most of us are a long way from that level of desperation! We wouldn't mind a little divine influence, maybe, or a heavenly nudge here and there, but as for tearing open the heavens, creating earthquakes and fires, and scaring the daylights out of every nation, wellõ we're not quite ready for that! And

as for the apocalyptic vision of Mark 13, we tend to just chalk that up to a first-century literary oddity that seemed to enjoy imagining the sky falling in.

And besides, why do we get these end-of-the-world scenarios at the beginning of Advent? Here we are at the first Sunday of the liturgical year, and already the texts are plunging us into thoughts of the end of time! What's going on here? Well, what's going on is the recognition that every age needs some kind of divine intervention. Advent, in other words, is not so much about the baby in a cradle as it is about world in a fix. And what is God going to do about that?

And as for all this apocalyptic language, we would do well read it for what it is: it is metaphorical, not literal, and it emerges during a time of crisis. We all talk in extremes when we are in crisis, don't we?

II

But let's take the time to look beneath that language to the great themes of Advent, which are forever contemporary. For example, the writer in Isaiah speaks of waiting:

*From ages past no one has heard, nor ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him. (Is. 64: 4)*

This is virtually the opposite of the concept of God current with much of our culture. We tend to think of God, if we think of God at all, as waiting for us

to do something! Waiting for us to create a new strategic plan, or waiting for us to begin a new administration in Washington, or waiting for us to end the war, or create new jobs, or end poverty, or end greed. In this view of God, it is all up to us.

While we readily recognize our own role in making change happen, Advent appropriately calls our attention to all our striving and says, "Wait a minute- this is not all your doing. There is a God at work in the world!+ God is working in the world despite our worry and all our frantic work, despite all our most embarrassing failures and our most wonderful achievements. There are times when we need to step back from all our frantic activity and quietly wait on God.

Let's assume you have a terribly busy schedule this week. You have more to do than you can possibly get done. The pressures are overwhelming at work and at home. But let's suppose that you have tickets to a concert on Friday night. You work up to the last minute, then rush to the Mechanics Hall and take your seat. Then you wait. The musicians tune their instruments, and all is ready. Finally, the conductor walks out to great applause, taps the podium, and the orchestra begins to play a glorious symphony. You find yourself changing your attitude toward life. You have been striving under heavy burdens; you have been aggressively solving

problems; you have been actively working out details of plans. But now, you become quietly receptive. You let the music sweep over you, and something happens to you that you can't explain. You have been busy doing something to your world, but now another world is doing something to you! It is a different kind of experience, and one that changes you!

Advent is that kind of experience, when we pass from our ordinary world of aggressively trying to enforce our will on things, to a world of receptive waiting on God. The instruments are tuned, and we are waiting for God's tap of the baton, and the glorious music of another world begins to sweep over us.

III

So these Advent texts emphasize the theme of waiting. But they also emphasize another Advent theme that is too often left out, and is more important than ever these days. It is the theme of inclusion, of universality. Advent, in other words, is bigger than Christianity. Even while we are leading up to a celebration of the birth of Jesus (a distinctively Christian celebration), Advent is about God entering the world of humanity, of whatever religion.

For example, in the Isaiah passage, the phrase *we all* appears four times, and each time it appears it is significant. ***We all have become like***

one who is unclean (v.6a), says the text, meaning that we all have blown it. Every religion, every race, every government, and every single person· we have all blown it and we need help. The writer further says, **We all fade like a leaf** (v. 6b), meaning that with all our differences, we all share a common death. We all die. Two verses later the ancient writer says, ...**we are all the work of your hand** (v. 8), and uses the ancient metaphor of God as the potter and we are the clay. And finally comes the plaintive, yearning statement, *Now consider [God], we are all your people* (v. 9).

Advent is a time when we remember that we are all God's people. When we read the Christmas story from Luke in a few weeks we will hear once again the angel speaking to the shepherds: *I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people* (Luke 2: 10). We will sing with great fervor, *Joy to the World, the Lord is Come!* Advent, in other words, is a time for inclusion.

IV

During this Advent, as we wait for God to work for all people, think of it this way. Beethoven wrote music far beyond the capacity of the instruments of his day. We read, for example, that the solo of the C minor Concerto was played on a miserable little box of wires, hardly more sonorous than a spinet.+ So Beethoven wrote music that could not

adequately be rendered on the instruments of his time, music that was in itself a prayer: give me instruments so that I can really be played!

Beethoven's music compelled the creation of new instruments so that it could be played the way it was meant to be played.

Suppose that you, devoutly loving the music of Beethoven, heard the C minor Concerto at its first rendition. You would have known, would you not, that such music could not possibly be the end of the story? That though it might be a long time from Beethoven to a modern symphony orchestra, yet the music itself would bring to pass at last an orchestra which could play it properly.

So we who deeply believe in Christ and hear his music being marred by social and economic injustices, by racial and religious hatreds, by international policies that perpetuate war, and even by religious pronouncements that seem to perpetuate intolerance and bigotry, know deep down that these realities are not the end of the story. The music is not yet being played the way God intended it to be played.

But underline this in your faith in this Advent season: **the future belongs to the music, and not to those wretched, obsolete instruments that distort the intentions of the Divine Composer. That is the hope of the world!**