

Sermon - Advent I, Year B
12/3/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the first day of the new liturgical year. It seems hard to believe, all things considered, but for all scholars can tell, this season of Advent began as a fast. In the year 480, records were kept in a monastery in Gaul that instructed the monks to fast and turn their hearts to particular devotion for the four Sundays preceding the Nativity. For centuries, this is what Advent looked like – a time of stillness, quiet, preparation, and repentance. It was often called the “Little Lent.”

If you were a Christian in the middle ages and into the Renaissance, these four Sundays of Advent would often be marked by a series of four sermons on what are known as the Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell. Preachers would guide their captive congregations in meditation upon their own final days on earth, and what portions of their lives were in need of reform in order to prepare for the second coming of Christ.

All of this can seem to stand in contrast to the world beyond the walls of the churches. These December days are already filled with Christmas music, lights and vibrant decorations, feasts and parties and gifts and cheer. There is nothing wrong with these things. God knows that in these long, dark, winter days, we take our joys where we can find them. But as we begin this fresh, new Advent, I think we might take great comfort in what the Bible tells us about the true fullness of this season.

Our readings today are not about the gentle baby Jesus in the manger. Our text from Isaiah this morning is a lament of a people in exile – the mourning song of an Israel that knows they have rejected and failed the God who loves them. Our chapter begins with the cry: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your

presence...” The word translated here as “tear open” is sometimes given as “rend” – “O that you would rend the heavens!” It is the Hebrew word *qara*, and it can literally mean “break down the door.”

O that you would break down the door and come down! As if Israel has shut God out – left God to languish in the cold, barricaded their own walls and forgotten how to tear them down. It is as if Israel has turned so far from God’s righteousness that they know they do not deserve his presence, and yet they long for Him. They pray. They cry out: *O that you would break down this door and come down.*

For all of the Christmas music, and the parties, and the lights, this prayer of the prophet Isaiah seems like the right one for the world right now. I think about God almost all of the time. I try to see him everywhere. And still I find places where it feels as if the only way that God could be let in would be for him to break down a door.

But all we must remember is what St. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians: “God is faithful.” God is faithful. God is faithful to Israel, who he never forgot, even in their longest nights of exile. God is faithful to the Corinthians, who were not exactly a community filled with entirely generous and model Christians. God is faithful because indeed every door is broken down when he comes to us in his Son, Jesus, in the nativity that we prepare for now. And God is faithful when Jesus, in the Gospel from St. Mark today talks about what sounds like the end of the world.

What this means for all of us today is that Advent can be a kind season for us, no matter what doors we find ourselves hiding behind in our own lives or circumstances. Advent is a broad season. It is a capacious season. Advent can stretch its arms around us, no matter how great or small our measure of Christmas cheer. Advent is a season for those of us who are longing for

something. It's for all of us who are waiting for something, even when we are not quite sure what that something might be. It's a time that can bless our joys but also accompany us in the midst of trouble or anxiety, because the One we wait for is faithful. As Isaiah writes, "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."

Advent is a time of preparation, but it also encompasses death, judgement, heaven, and hell. And so if you are in the midst of one of those – or all of those – this can be a season for you. Let it be a time of expectation – not expectations of you, but expectation of the God who loves you. We are called to wait for the savior of the world, not to be the savior of the world.

*Restore us, O God of hosts; **

show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

Amen.