

3rd December 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Smith

Hymns: 180 “O come, O come Immanuel”
 741 “We pray until the hour”
 736 “In heavenly love abiding”
 568 “Alleluia! Sing to Jesus”
 264 “Make way, may way for Christ the King”

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9
 Mark 13:24-37

Prayer

Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

“TEARING OPEN THE HEAVENS”

Friends every year I read the great prophetic passages of Isaiah, of Zechariah and Malachi – every year I hear about the promise of the Messiah, and every year I look at the world and see its broken parts – our iniquity.

And every year, this year - a little voice in my head thinks,
‘Maybe this will be the year that Joseph and Mary finally get a room.

Maybe this will be the year when an empire – in that case Rome - decides NOT to shift great swathes of refugees from city to city for a census.

Maybe this will be the year when those wise ones, the Magi from the east arrive early - and bypass the palace altogether! Maybe this year they’ll finally bring more useful gifts – less Frankincense and Myrrh and more warm food and nappies!

Maybe, just maybe, this will be the year when Herod the King is a better king and stays his hand from evil, and all the small babies are safe – Jesus among them.

And if in the story of the events of Jesus birth, then in our world today, in my cold heart. Maybe this will be the year!

When we step away from our iniquity to do something different – and the wrath of God, which is nothing less than the full mercy of our creator, the origin of all things - finally brings justice -

In his terrifying poem ‘The Second Coming,’ written in 1919, WB Yeats spoke of ‘things come apart’ and ‘mere anarchy loosed upon the world.’

Yeats wrote at the end of the Great War about the death of the notion that western civilization was on a path of continuing progress and enlightenment.

Lines from this poem have been used by a number of authors since, but it has never been more effectively appropriated with some irony by the great writer Chinua Achebe to give the title to his 1958 novel about the destructive impact of colonial rule on Igbo culture. 'Things fall apart.'

Well friends, maybe this will be the year when, to reverse Yeats' words and answer Achebe's prophetic call, things will come together: the blood-dimmed tide will be stayed, innocence protected.

Maybe this will be the year when the worst people are all in a dither and 'lack all conviction' just for once, while the best among us are filled with purpose and passion.

And moving beyond the prophetic call of these two authors, maybe this will be the year that a world leader stops confusing a malicious twitter feed and endorsing anti-foreigner vitriol with international diplomacy. Maybe this will be the year when people fight to get on the commission for social inequality, rather than resigning en-mass, as has been announced this morning.

O God that you would tear open the heavens and come down - let this be the year that we see a tipping point from which there is no going back – you know – the kind when kindling catches and burns, or fire makes water boil – The language of Isaiah here describes what we now know as chemical process that cannot be undone – so earthy, so evocative.

I join our voice calling out to God with the prophet Isaiah.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, our new year. It is a season of waiting, of watching, of hoping for the coming of God. But every year I need to re-learn what it is to wait, to watch, and to hope. And our worship in Advent, week on week will take us through and around these themes.

Because our God HAS torn open heaven. This is the year – God is coming and has taken on Godself the full measure of humanity.

But if we are still waiting, watching, hoping for a King in a palace or power as the world measures it, we will be disappointed.

If this is my hope, I am not yet awake. And friends, we want to be awake, not just because Jesus commands it, but because this is a beautiful world – an extraordinary creation – beloved of the beautiful creator and embodied in Jesus Christ, breathed and brooded over by that Holy Spirit who is with us now.

It is a beautiful creation with such possibility even now, even today. This is the advent of God among us!

To wait, to Watch, to Hope.

So what are we waiting for – well, for Christmas obviously. But remember, the promise elsewhere in Isaiah is not that the messiah makes all NEW things, but that God makes ALL THINGS new. This isn't to go all bah humbug and say we can't have any presents or have to buy them from the charity shop. Though it should challenge any notion I have that I can buy my way out of loneliness, or eat my way into fullness of life on the 2 for one offers at Waitrose. I know because I've tried. We don't preach against rampant retail consumption just because of its on costs for labourers and global economy, but also because in the end it doesn't work, is no substitute for love.

Not all new things, but all things new. Friends in Methodist terms we have always spoken of this second coming, or Advent, of God as the fire of grace kindled in each person's heart, and the new kingdom come on earth.

Salvation has never been about rescuing some special few from an evil world, but about the redemption of all things.

And working that out in our mission means that we don't protect and preserve our holy life, building higher walls around our hearts and thicker skins to keep the bad stuff out, but that we wait in the midst of all the unfinished business, in the wreck of our best intentions, and with unanswered questions – we wait with expectation.

A number of folk who worship here regularly, along with a number of businesses locally and churches and others have noticed an uptick in rough sleeping and begging in this area, in recent months. And there are lots of useful responses, there are constructive things to do and say – individual kind and prophetic actions like buying food or a warm coat, and support for Whitechapel mission, referrals to Crisis and Shelter.

But they aren't making the problem go away. None of those absolutely constructive and correct responses silences the conscience that does, and should call out if I go home to a warm house and someone else does not. And if you have been troubled by this yourself, take heart your troubled conscience is a sign of your own health!

Waiting, in a proper Advent way, is about staying with this problem and refusing either to leave the field 'it's just one of those things – best not to dwell on it' or to rush for easy answers that might salve my conscience, but do not actually bring redemption. Waiting is uncomfortable and countercultural, in a world of instant gratification and same day delivery.

Waiting also exposes me to the reality of my own privilege, if I do go home to a warm house. It exposes to me uncomfortably the gap between some things I take for granted and how it is to live without those things. I so wish I could say waiting is uncomfortable only because my compassion is so strong, to demand quick solutions for people who are in need – but it is also that waiting exposes me to my own assumed rights, the sin of our unfinished world, and my part in it.

Waiting is uncomfortable. Countercultural. And absolutely what we are about in Advent, there are no shortcuts however fast you open the windows on the chocolate advent calendar!

Do not step away from waiting, take as much of it as you can bear and then a little more – you can risk this, and I can, because we are safe in God's faithful care. Specifically because we are clay, God our potter. We are waiting in the promise we have already known, that God refuses to abandon this world or us in it.

But as we wait, we watch. Be alert, says Jesus to his disciples, in the Gospel: be alert because you do not know when the master is coming, nor where you will see this promised new life!

Remember, it is not 'he is making all NEW things,' but 'he will make ALL THINGS new.' This means that new life comes in the stuff already around us. It means that God's coming in my heart does not wait for me to become someone new, someone better, more faithful, more compassionate, less hurt or tired – God's grace is kindled just as I am right now, on this 'mean altar of my [own] heart,' to use Charles' Wesley's phrase.

So the command in today's Gospel which could not be clearer - 'be alert' tells me to look where and when I am not expecting – where I'm really not expecting – to see new life.

To watch seems such a simple thing, and yet – how often are we actually only watching to justify an opinion or form a judgment – like listening to someone only to form a response or rebuttal. That's not what Advent watching is about.

To watch, to be alert in an advent way is to look with the eyes of God – to see reality, not just to accept a soundbite nor a settled media conclusion about something and call that opinion.

And notice, Jesus is speaking to his disciples in the Gospel today, but he clarifies just so they really get it in the last verse we had – 'and what I say to you I say to ALL, 'keep awake'! It is not just folk like us who are called to be awake, to watch, but all. This may give us some companions in our watch that we do not expect.

It is not 'you Methodists, Keep awake,' or even you Christians, 'Keep awake,' but he says to ALL – watch and be alert.

To watch is to expect surprise, to be humble and open.

To study reality and look for signs of God's advent. And sometimes we may not understand what we are seeing.

To go back to my little local example - Has there actually been an uptick of rough sleeping, locally? Or is it that suddenly we see it? What routes into, and out of homelessness are there here, and what part can we play? Are these routes to do with health care, or emotional and relationship well being, with education or accommodation, or benefits policy, or immigration?

To watch, in an advent way, is to put the needs of the world in the foreground of my attention. Not to project my first assumptions onto a situation, or to assume I understand. To watch is to stay alert, to keep awake to the unexpected answer and unexpected companion in the watch, to see where our special calling may be. TO

watch is to look for the chances to put our small individual kindnesses together into something bigger, not just a plaster but advocacy.

And if we wait, and watch in Advent, surely we hope.

Not, in the end, that this might be the year when Mary and Joseph finally get a room, when the kings come early and the hand of empire is stayed. No. Friends there is not going to be a year when Jesus is finally born in a palace.

Hope is not the same as optimism. Hope is characterized by urgency, but not anxiety. By curiosity, not fear. Hope is based in the promise Isaiah puts right out there – ‘Yet – STILL TODAY - you are our Father. We are the clay and you are our potter, we are all the work of your hand.’ Consider that, friends. Here is the source of our hope.

And our mission – here I quote a US pastor called Victoria Safford – our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope – not the prudent gates of optimism, which are somewhat narrower.

Nor the stalwart, boring gates of common sense; nor the strident gates of self-righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges,

...but a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth telling, about your own soul fist of all and its condition.

The place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be

As it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but the joy of struggle.

And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing
Asking people what they see.

Wait, Watch, Hope.

The promise is that this IS the year. The heavens are tearing open and God is coming. There is nothing you can do to make God love you more than God does, right now. The clay of our hearts is still wet, Gods hands reach again for the unfinished world. And each of us, in it?

And our advent walk together – the candles we light, songs we sing and the symbols like evergreen we use to remind us of God’s promise – it is a good walk.

Tearing open the heaven, God comes. SO wait, watch, hope – abiding in the love which calls you home and bears you forward.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

Abiding in the love which never changes, we sing: