



“Birth Pangs”

Text: Mark 13:24-37

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Today is the first day of Advent. What we call Ordinary Time is now over. Advent is the time of anticipation and hope. What kind of things do you during Advent? Do you bake mountains of cookies to give to family or friends or for a cookie exchange? Have you started decorating your house with a tree and all the decorations that go along with that? Garland around the fireplace, creches set up with all the characters but the baby Jesus. Are you getting into the festive mood yet? My sister set up her tree last weekend when her oldest son was home for Thanksgiving and I’ve started to see Christmas lights on some houses near me. It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas, as the saying goes.

As you can see, however, our Sanctuary is not quite set up as it usually is. That will happen after the service, so you can expect this place to look more festive next week. But I’m kind of glad that it is not all decorated yet, because we shouldn’t jump over Advent to Christmas. Advent should be a time to reflect on the unexpected nature of Jesus’ humble birth and join in the anticipation of when he will come again to reunite Heaven and Earth once and for all. That is the work we are supposed to be doing during Advent: reflecting on the unexpected nature of Jesus’ humble birth and what his subsequent years on earth meant for us.

We have the privilege of knowing that Jesus has already come once and so perhaps it makes it a little easier to find the hope that he will come again, though maybe not. The passage from Isaiah that we read this morning is a hard passage to hear and maybe not one that immediately comes to mind when thinking of Advent. For it is questioning where God is in the midst of great difficulty.

This passage comes after the Hebrew people had been exiled and now had been freed by King Cyrus to return to their homeland. They had longed for this time to return to their homes. They had dreamt about it. Their expectations were high. But when they returned, things were not as they expected. Jerusalem was not as they had left it. The people that had remained and the people who had come after they left had changed many things, among them land ownership and the power balance. And so threats and divisions erupted between and among the groups.

The Hebrew people in many ways had turned their backs on God. They weren't praying. They weren't looking to God to solve their problems. They were angry and bitter and adversarial. It is in response to this situation that we find Isaiah praying to God; and, like any good prophet, any good prayer warrior, Isaiah prays with heartfelt passion for and on behalf of the people, these lost people who have strayed so far from God.

These words of Isaiah's, words of lament, words of grief, even words of accusation, for Isaiah turns the tables in this passage and says, "How can we find you when you have turned your face from us?" Words of judgment about the people, about God, might seem too harsh to think about in the Season of Advent, but Advent has always held in tension the combination of God's judgment and God's promise.

Isaiah portrays a God who does awesome deeds that often surprise God's people. Yet God's people in this moment have forgotten to call upon God. And, so, in this Season of Advent, we need to reflect - have we in ways turned our backs on God, relying on our own understanding of things, of seeing the world and our lives through the lens of humanity instead of with the eyes of faith and hope?

As I mentioned recently, we are a world in war. We are constantly hearing about who has more military power? Russia or Ukraine? Are people wrong to protest what Israel is doing in Gaza or are the protesters right? What money do we send and what weapons of war do we send? We humans depend upon military power alone to make mountains quake and nations tremble; whereas Isaiah recognizes that it is God alone who can make mountains shake and nations tremble. And that is where we are today.

Perhaps not you personally, but we can see by the chaos in our government and in our society that we have turned our backs on God. We can see it around the world as people are killed and maimed in the name of power and control, in the name of abuse and desperation. And where is God in the madness that is all around us? Has God hidden God's face from us? Or do we rely too much on the earthly powers and forget to pray and depend on God?

Isaiah is not a proponent of easy grace. He shows a God who hides their face from a people who reject God's righteous ways. I read this quote this past week: We used to be a country that wanted to be good, but now we are a country that wants to feel good. And I would add that we used to be a country whose leaders used power for good. Now we have leaders who use power to try and gain more power for themselves. And where does that leave us?

Perhaps in a strange way, we are to begin this Advent Season with weeping and lament. It is unusual to suggest, yet think how powerful that is. To lament where this country, where this world is now. To lament that our faith and our faith practices are not what they should be. That our thoughts on buying that perfect gift for a beloved one keeps our thoughts from being upon the One whose birth we anticipate and give thanks for.

The arrival of Advent jolts the church out of Ordinary Time, or at least it should. Because Advent contains the invasive news that it is time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and wholeness. Peace, the peace of shalom/salaam, is at the heart of the promise born at Advent, but, and this is a big BUT, it is difficult to arrive at this place of promise of peace without becoming vulnerable along the way. Vulnerable. That is a hard word to hear. Many people are threatened by that word. We don't want to be vulnerable. We toughen up and hide those parts of ourselves we don't want anyone else to see. But to reach that place of peace and hope, to get to the heart of the promise born at Advent, we need to do the work of repentance and forgiveness. Everything that God desires for us comes through repentance and forgiveness, but that is so hard to do. We try to stem our hurt and pride by running away from pain and putting ourselves and our families first. But we cannot create peace through selfishness, without reflection, without awareness, but we can create peace through opening ourselves up to hope. It is then that we can welcome in the good news about fresh possibilities for deliverance and wholeness. And that's why God sent the Son; so that we can experience deliverance and wholeness; that we can experience hope and peace.

So what are we to do now? We need to do the inward work of reflection, repentance, forgiveness, but then we are to be do-ers, as Isaiah did, in pleading to God to help the people.

I read that a Palestinian pastor said that the Christians in Gaza would not be celebrating Christmas this year, partly for obvious reasons, but also because in the midst of war, in the midst of death and destruction, in the midst of grief and seeming hopelessness, they needed to know that God had not abandoned them and to that he asked, "Where are the American churches? Why are they not helping in protest, in writing their representatives and President for help for the Christians of Gaza. The article said there were about 1,000 Palestinian Christians in Gaza before the war started and many have been killed. it went on to say that people in the Holy Land feel forsaken, feel abandoned by the church globally; but, also, they know that Jesus stands at odds with that and is saying, "If everyone abandons you, I will be with you." The horrors of war. The challenges of keeping the faith in the midst of death and destruction, starvation and thirst. How can we be there for them when we have such a difficult time being there for each other and for our own broken selves?

I like this statement about Advent: Advent is not a time for passive waiting and watching. It is a season of wailing and weeping, of opening our lives and souls with active anticipation and renewed hope. And, we should not lose heart; rather, we are to live with our hearts broken open so that compassion, caring, and God's reckless love can find a way into our hearts and into the heart of the world. Make straight in our hearts a highway for the possibility of peace.

Finally, I want to share one last story. This woman wrote that she grew up in a family that didn't put up Christmas decorations early. In fact, she grew up in a house with no decorations until Christmas morning. On Christmas she would wake up to a house fully decorated. When she got older and saw that her friends' families put up their decorations early, she asked her mother why they didn't. She said Christmas should come like it did on that first Christmas so long ago, like a beautiful, glorious surprise. The Hebrew people waited for the coming of the Savior. We wait for the second coming of our savior. No one knows when that day will come, but like the first Christmas so long ago, it will come as a beautiful and glorious surprise. So do the work and in so doing may you find hope and find peace; a hope and peace so profound that you will want to shout it from the mountaintops and share it with all whom you see. Amen.



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