

Waiting in Strength
Mark 13.24-37 and 1 Corinthians 1:1-9
December 3, 2017
Advent 1B
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It's December 3, and our culture is in full Christmas mode—ridiculous sweaters, breathtaking lights, family trips to *The Nutcracker* and Celebration Under the Oaks, and more holiday parties than we can attend. But the season of Advent speaks to a different rhythm. It's more than a "not yet" of obligatory delayed gratification. Advent is telling us to wait together for something to be revealed. Something to celebrate not because it's glittery and fun but because it's hidden and mysterious with the power to transform everything forever. And I'm pretty sure that *this* Advent we are more curious than ever, some of us even more eager, to know the hiddenly mysterious power of God that might transform the whole of creation.

And so Advent begins with apocalypse—an uncovering, a revealing of what is true and what is false. In scripture, we find these fiery, end times stories of judgment, of a human one coming down from the clouds, tremendous suffering met by darkness and stars falling from the sky. It's bizarre and terrifying and easy to dismiss as old or irrelevant. Oh, but we don't take the easy way of hitting our bibles with scissors like Thomas Jefferson. No, we ask better questions. Why would this word be inspiring to a particular and peculiar people? Why would this word be a word of HOPE on the first Sunday of Advent? What is happening in the life of a people that the thought of burning the whole world to the ground seems a more hopeful notion than sticking with the status quo?

Maria Swearingen, co-pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in D.C., reminded some of us yesterday that Luke's Gospel begins, "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed," adding, "It's like the whole life of Jesus begins with a story about unjust taxation or something. It's like unjust taxation would have framed Jesus' entire moral imagination or something. It's like Jesus' childhood was deeply affected by people in power who chose their own avarice over the well-being of the people or something."¹

¹ Maria Swearingen shared this on Facebook Saturday, December 2, 2017.

She's taking us somewhere in this story, isn't she? In the face of oppressive government and a society in which only a few determined the well-being of the many, a story emerges about what is abidingly real and what is a mere interruption of false narrative. Into very real pain comes a story that says, "What is happening around you isn't the real deal. Those jokers in power are the real power. The fear and destruction they are causing isn't how the story ends. Caesar's decree will not be the final word.

Now that is a very particular—real life here and now, speaking into the heartbeat of people who perceive they don't have much of a say in their destiny—word of hope. And *THAT* is the waiting of Advent. So let's hang out here together for a few weeks even while the fun and light of American Christmas goes on around us because the work of Advent waiting invites us to reconsider how we see and engage everything.

Paul writes to the church at Corinth about waiting because they are giving up. The emerging Jesus Way is incongruous with the robust life of their wealthy port city. The calling of a shared life as a people is not as compelling as the pursuit of a personal life apart from the church.

But these aren't people who would rather be at brunch than in church. If we read through the entire letter from Paul to the Corinthian church, we discover a mess. "Divisions within the community were evident in many particulars of the community's life, including, for instance, adherence to different human leaders (see 1:10-17), different judgments about what Paul saw as the scandalous sexual behavior of a significant person in the church (5:1-13), members of the church suing one another in public courts (6:1-8), the unequal treatment of people of higher and lower status at the celebration of the common meal (11:17-22), and different judgments about the gifts of the Spirit and practices in community worship (12:1-14:40)."²

Of the Corinthians, William Loader comments, "For while it is true they are good at talking about their faith and pursuing wisdom, they are also distracted by a sense of their own importance and their own rhetoric. Not so subtly Paul is targeting the self sufficiency of at least some Corinthians who think they have arrived and who have become the source of division."³

The standards and practices of the culture around them were shaping the way the church ordered itself rather than the church being a set-apart community that pushed back against a false story with a real one. Members of the congregation believed that

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=23

³ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpAdvent1.htm>

their own giftedness or wealth or social capacity was a sign of God's unique blessing on them as individuals and therefore made them more important within the congregation. If one contributed more money or served more hours, then that person got the best seat and the most food and first access to the bread and the cup.

Paul's letter reminds them: at this table, all are equal and gather as brothers and sisters. No one is higher than the other. They might do that out there, we don't do that in here. In this community, we affirm that each and every person, regardless of wealth or education or home or life story, bears the image of God within them. In this place we speak to one another with honesty, kindness, patience, and love. Paul is writing to remind them of their story and remind them that they are shaped and formed by One they cannot see but One for whom they wait.

And they aren't waiting as scattered individuals for this Christ to be fully revealed. No, they are waiting together as a people. And as a people, they grow in strength as they wait in peculiar and particular ways. Who they are as a people will grow in them so fully that it changes the way they live until "in here" and "out there" aren't distinctions anymore. And ultimately, the ways of "in here" become the ways of "out there" as healing and wholeness and peace spread out from the community like ripples through the world.

And it is very much as a community that the young church will experience such transformation. Dwight Peterson observes, "Later in the passage, Paul notes that the church at Corinth is called not only 'out' of the world, but 'into' community...being set apart for God and toward each other." To that point, Mary Hinkle Shore adds, "It is impossible to come away from this text with the impression of Christian life as an individualized spiritual journey. Paul gives thanks for God's gifts to the Corinthians as a group and names their community with Christ as the defining characteristic of their life together."⁴

If nothing else, maybe reframing what it is that we are doing here is enough hope for this day. We are being called *into* community and set toward each other. The journey we are on is shared, and the path we walk can only be experienced together. In this circle of relationship, we discover our true selves. In this circle of relationship, we form a resistance against whatever the powers of oppression are conspiring to demand and decree.

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1948

Peterson challenges, "The church in our day (or in our town), like that in Corinth, has been called by God. We, like the Corinthians, have been extravagantly equipped for faithful living. We, like the Corinthians, live in the midst of a culture that makes faithfulness a moral and intellectual challenge. We, like the Corinthians, are (or ought to be) committed to the truth and life-shaping power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which puts our lives in the world into a context that helps faithful living make sense. And we, like the Corinthians (sigh!), routinely fall short of the expectations of the Gospel and need to be called to greater and more difficult (and perhaps more creative) faithful living."

But don't be discouraged by the reality of your human-ness. You are not lacking in any spiritual gift. Truth, real life, best life is not "out there" beyond you; it is already here. You are not lacking. You already have what you need. We are not waiting for something we do not already have. We are waiting, together, to wake up to the fullness of God revealed. You have received this life, this breath, this heartbeat, this passion as grace—pure gift.

We're not just waiting for Christ to appear and be revealed out there over there somewhere. We're waiting for Christ to be revealed in us and through us. It is through the community Christ has gathered, through the people Christ has equipped, and through the ones who wait attentively that this holy transformation will come. We have everything we need to continue in faith. But we aren't finished. We haven't arrived. We're waiting. And as we wait, we grow stronger.