

Waiting and Perception

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Scripture Readings

Isaiah 64

Mark 13:24-37

Sermon

It was beyond imagining – for my generation at least – beyond imagining when the Berlin wall came down in 1989. For all our lives, the Wall had been there, separating East from West, dividing dark from light. But then, all of sudden, the wall was torn down. And there was an advent of freedom. Long-dim hopes at last were realized.

People who hope – whether for summer, for an improved economy, or for freedom from tyranny – people who hope are necessarily people who wait. That’s how it is for the people of God. Always we hope. And always we wait. Which brings us back to the beginning, to a new year, to the first season of the year, to Advent.

BUT FIRST LET’S TAKE A STEP BACK to the time of the prophets. For two generations the people of Israel had been in exile . . . And let me stop right there. Because we simply don’t understand the Bible unless we recognize how central to the Bible is the story of Israel in exile.

The Bible’s very first stories are shaped by Israel’s experience of exile. The story of Adam and Eve is a story of exile, as is the story of Cain. The book of Deuteronomy is a profound reflection on Israel’s exile and the reasons for it. Much of the rest of the Old Testament gives us Israel heading toward exile, Israel struggling in exile, or Israel trying to break out of exile. When we get to the New Testament, to the coming of Jesus, what we have, first of all, is God’s answer to the lingering questions of exile, especially the question “Is God with us or not?”

BACK TO THE PROPHETS. This morning’s Old Testament reading, Isaiah 64, is born of the struggle of Israel in exile. There they were for two generations waiting for God. For two generations, they told each other the old stories. Fire and smoke. Lightning and thunder. Earthquake and flood. And now, with those stories in mind, they were praying for something big:

If only you would tear open the heavens and come down!

If only the mountains would quake!

If only the nations would tremble at your presence!

(cf. Isaiah 64:1-2)

Everywhere there were walls, walls that locked Israel away in exile, walls that defended wicked nations. Even the heavens were a wall, separating God from his people.

*Break through the walls!
the people prayed.
Come back to your people!
Remember Egypt that couldn't hold us.
Remember Jericho that couldn't wall us out.
Remember and do it again!
Redraw the map with Israel at its center.*

OF COURSE, THERE WERE REASONS FOR THE EXILE. There were reasons for the destruction of Jerusalem, for the tearing down of its wall. There were reasons that Israel no longer appeared on the map. God was angry with his people. They knew that. And they owned up to it. Listen to the prophet:

*We sinned.
We transgressed.
We turned away from you.
We are filthy!*
(cf. Isaiah 64:5-7)

NOW HERE'S SOMETHING THAT AMAZES ME. Maybe it's in the DNA of a chosen people. I don't know. But have you ever noticed and have you ever wondered about how brutally honest the Old Testament scriptures can be? From start to finish, those scriptures seem intent on demonstrating that Israel is a messed up people, that Israel is no better than its neighbors, that Israel in no way deserves to be a chosen people, and that being chosen in no way makes Israel superior. What other nation tells its own story that way?

Our presidential candidates insist that the United States is the greatest country in the world, an almost chosen nation, to take a phrase from Lincoln. And they insist that our best days are ahead of us – if only we would elect them. How far do you think any of those candidates would get if they told our national story the way the Old Testament tells Israel's story, without glossing over the ugliness and shame?

The prophet owned up to Israel's brokenness and sin. The prophet acknowledged that Israel had only one hope, the faithfulness of God.

*Despite everything we have done,
you are our father.
Nothing can change that.
Despite how distorted we are,
we remain your workmanship.
By your initiative,
we are your people.*

*That's what we will depend on.
That's what we will anchor our hope on as we wait,
as we wait for you,
as we wait for you to come.*

(cp. Isaiah 64:8-9)

And so Israel hoped and Israel waited.

BUT WHEN GOD ENDED THE WAITING, Israel didn't see it. Maybe because nothing big happened. God did not tear open the heavens. God did not shake the mountains. No, God quietly hopped over the wall and came down, hiding in darkness for nine months while dressing himself in human flesh. And Israel didn't see it. Israel couldn't see it.

But something big would happen, something groundbreaking, something earthshaking, something that could best be described in apocalyptic language. Apocalyptic is not a literal language. It's highly figurative, intended to evoke a sense of awe:

*The sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from the heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

(Mark 13:24-25)

Yes, something big was coming. Within forty years, Jerusalem would be destroyed again. The city wall would be leveled. The temple would be torn down. "Not one stone would be left standing upon another" (cf. Mark 13:2).

This would be the work of Rome. Rome was the center of the map, and the map would not be redrawn! Rome had triumphed, and Rome would triumph again. So it would seem.

But instead Jerusalem's destruction would demonstrate that Jesus ruled, that he had ascended in clouds of glory to the right hand of Almighty God (cf. Mark 13:26). All those who had used their power to destroy Jesus – the authorities in Jerusalem and the priests in the temple, in collusion with the servants of Caesar in Rome – they, all of them, would lose. They and their death-dealing tools would be proved powerless. Jesus' resurrection and ascension would show their power to be irrelevant.

Never mind redrawing the map. God would tear up the map. God would redefine power not as a matter of brute force, not as a matter of violence, not as a calculation based on state-of-the-art weapons systems and logistical preparedness. No, God would redefine power as a matter of grace and mercy and love.

WE'RE IN A SEASON OF WAITING as part of a long history of waiting. But when what we're waiting for finally comes, will we see it? I wonder about that. Especially when our waiting and hoping are so influenced by the surrounding culture, which is never a good thing.

In the 6th century B.C., the surrounding culture was the culture of Babylon. Hostile to the kingdom of God. In the first century A.D., the surrounding culture was the culture of Second Temple Judaism and of Imperial Rome. Both hostile to the kingdom of God. In the 21st century, the surrounding culture is the culture of greed, amusement, and war. And it, too, is hostile to the kingdom of God.

But that culture shapes our desires and our hopes. It colors our experience of waiting. That's why we have to subject the surrounding culture to the critical lens of the scriptures. Only through the lens of biblical expectation, only through the lens of the gospel, will we learn to hunger and thirst for the kingdom of God and for its way of putting everything right. Only through that kind of disciplined perception will we be able to recognize the kingdom of God when it comes.

"TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN!" was the ancient prayer. But God did not tear the heavens open. Instead God slipped through a narrow opening, unnoticed, in order to be with us as one of us, in order to be our Immanuel.

God did not tear open the heavens. But when Jesus was put to death, God did tear the temple veil in two. That was a prelude to the coming destruction of the temple itself and of the entire city of Jerusalem, at the hand of its erstwhile Roman ally, whose empire also would crumble and fall. The fall of Jerusalem, for its part, was a first indication that the kingdom of God would not come by way of temples and citadels and their walls.

After being hidden for nine months, God broke free of the virgin's womb and appeared in the flesh. In a similar way, after a time God broke through the temple veil to become present in our world in a new way. Now God is here through the Holy Spirit. And God is here through his chosen people, in whom the Spirit dwells.

BUT THERE IS NO CHOSEN NATION. Despite the stories that nations tell themselves, there is no chosen nation. No. There is instead the church. In every nation. In every nation, the church serves no kingdom but that of Jesus Christ. And in every nation, the church proclaims that kingdom, which is unlike any other. Because it's not a kingdom of battle and conquest and defensible borders. No, it's a kingdom of sacrifice and prayer, a kingdom of mercy and reconciliation. It's a kingdom in which Jesus, the one who surrenders himself to the cross, a kingdom in which Jesus is the king, the true and only king, unlike any king the world has ever seen or ever will see. And it's King Jesus that we are waiting for.

ADVENT IS THE SEASON OF WAITING. And it's our characteristic season. We're always waiting, waiting for God.

How will we perceive the presence of God? How will we not be blind to it? How? By having our vision formed by a distinct and holy culture. Yes, we are part of the surrounding culture. We can't help but to be influenced by that culture, immersed as we are in it. But we can and we must be more deeply shaped by the church's culture, which

is a distinct culture of worship and prayer, a culture whose heroic virtues are grace, mercy, and love.

Where this will lead, who knows? But if we put the kingdom first, let's not be surprised if walls start to fall.