

Actively Waiting

[Isaiah 64:1 – 9; Psalm 80:1 – 7, 17 - 19; Mark 13:24 – 37]

December 3, 2017 Advent 1 – St. Agatha Mennonite Church

“Are we there yet?” How many of you have heard this phrase? When our children were small we did several long road trips. When there were really young we would travel through the night and they would sleep. But there comes a time when good things come to an end. On one occasion we were traveling to PEI and left home about 10 at night. Of course, because of the excitement of heading out they didn’t fall asleep too soon and by about 4 in the morning as we were approaching Montreal the sky started to lighten – I should mention that this was the end of June so the time of longest daylight and with it, the early sunrise, especially in Montreal. Well, with the increasing light outside, the children began to wake up without much of a good night’s sleep. And we still had a ways to go until we reached PEI. Needless to say we heard the question “are we there yet?” more than a few times on that trip.

Most of us aren’t very fond of waiting, especially if we are just sitting in a car. There may be an excitement or joy initially but if the waiting goes on too long, we get impatient.

Advent is a time or season of waiting. This morning we lit the first of the Advent candles to mark our journey through Advent as we anticipate Christmas. When I was a child we always had Advent calendars where we would open a door or window each day of December until we got to Christmas Eve or sometimes the calendar went until Christmas day when we would open the final door which usually depicted the baby Jesus. It seems following generations weren’t satisfied with the excitement of seeing little pictures each day because the Advent calendars now all seem to have chocolate or something tasty like that. Either way, it is a way of counting down the time of waiting for the arrival of Jesus.

But there is also a certain tension around Advent. There is the tension of waiting for something that we know has already happened. In a sense we arbitrarily set up something that we can wait for. There is also a tension as we try to anticipate the coming of Jesus while all around us retailers are bombarding us with advertisements about what to buy for Christmas or Xmas. There is the anticipation of the Christmas gifts around the tree on Christmas morning in a world where so many live in deep poverty.

But still at Advent we wait, we wait for God to break into a world where God is already present but yet sometimes seems absent.

The prophet Isaiah also spoke to a people who were waiting, waiting for God. The passage we heard begins with a plea to God, a desperate plea for God to come into the world. **“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”** Was God not there with the people? It seems that God wasn’t. Isaiah recounts how in the past God did awesome deeds and was with the people but now things had changed. **“But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. ... There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of iniquity.”** [Isa. 64:5b,7]

God seems to have left the people but throughout this passage it almost seems like Isaiah is blaming God for Israel’s turning away from God or at least putting some of the responsibility for the severed relationship on God. There is some suggestion that this

reading is the result of the difficulty in translation from the original Hebrew into English where the meaning gets a little blurred or it could be that this represents the way the people of the time were feeling and it helped motivate their plea for God to break through the heavens and come down to be with them again as God had been in the past. It is a little reminiscent of Psalm 22 which Jesus quoted on the cross, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

But regardless of how we choose to interpret that aspect, we are left with a people who feel God’s absence and are waiting for God’s return. So we want to ask the question, ***Is there a purpose to God’s absence? Why would God choose to be absent from God’s people?***

I want to suggest 2 purposes that come out of God’s absence, or 2 things that we can learn from this absence or feeling of God’s absence.

1. Through God’s absence the people come to realize that it is God who is in control and not them. God is not some ever-present being that is at the *beck and call*. Someone that they can control and “take hold of” as Isaiah says in verse 7. To put this another way, in keeping with the season, God is not a type of Santa Claus to whom we send a wish list to be granted to us. The sense of God’s absence is a reminder that God, the creator of heaven and earth, creator of the universe, is the one in control. God is not obliged to be there for us, we don’t set the rules for God – it is God who decides.

2. The second point is that there is also a need for us to take responsibility while we are waiting for God. We cannot just sit back and wait passively. As the passage in Mark’s gospel reminds us, we don’t know the time, the day or the hour, of God’s coming and so we need to be active and prepared. At times when God feels absent to us, those are times when we need to become active in our waiting. Isaiah tells the people, **“There is no one who calls on your name”** but this is not an excuse to sit back and do nothing, it is a call to action. Isaiah makes a plea to God to come back to the people but there is also an implied call to the people to act, to call on God’s name and act as God desires.

As I said earlier there is a tension around Advent. During this time of year we set up this time of waiting, waiting for a predetermined date, we wait through 4 Sundays of Advent before reaching Christmas. The waiting is important and we should not be too quick move to Christmas, to the coming of God back into our lives, to the restoration of this relationship with God. As we wait through Advent, it is important to live in the moment, to be in this place where we anticipate God’s presence (not presents), this presence that we know has already come, that we know is here now, but yet the presence that we anticipate still coming.

The waiting of Advent is a time for us to look at ourselves and to challenge ourselves to actively wait for God’s coming. To take responsibility to act, to live out God’s kingdom in the world. We know God is coming and we know that in 22 days we will celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, God’s coming into the world in a new way. We know this but still we wait, we anticipate, but we also need to act.

In Mark’s gospel we are reminded that the story is not completed. It may seem like an odd passage to read as we approach Christmas, this passage that comes near the end of Jesus’ ministry. In this passage Jesus is telling his disciples about his next coming. This comes shortly before we read about his arrest and crucifixion – Jesus knows that his time on earth is coming to an end and he wants to warn his disciples about what is to come and

assure them that his death will not be the end of the story. There is still more to come and they (and we!) need to wait. And like in Isaiah, the message is not about passive waiting but it is to be active. **“Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work...”**

We have been given our work. In the time that Jesus was on earth he told and showed us what our work is. In a sense he spent his time on earth handing out and explaining our assignments. Yes we are waiting for his return, just like during Advent we wait, but we wait actively, doing God’s work, doing the work that Jesus started, as we wait for his return. Because we don’t know when it will be, we must stay alert in case his return happens today, and we must work like his return is a million years away. That is the tension.

I once heard someone say that you have to live your life like you will die tomorrow and at the same time as if you will live for a hundred years. Don’t put off what you need to do because you may run out of time, but you also need to look at life as long-term so we can still anticipate what is to come and plan for the future and not give up. That is the tension we live with and it is a good tension.

The people that Isaiah was speaking to were a longing people. They had grown up hearing stories of how God had been active in the history of their people and they longed for God to break into their lives. The people cried out to God to take action and they waited.

We are also a longing people. We read through the Bible of how God has acted in the past, how God has worked in the world, how God has been faithful to his people. We look around at our world today, at the suffering, the pain, the hatred and violence and we ask God to break into our lives, to restore relationships, to heal our wounds and illnesses, to bring peace. We cry out to God to act and wonder how God can just let these things happen. How can God stand by when children die from poverty and malnutrition, when families are torn apart by war, people are chased from their homes by fear and oppression. We wonder why God is absent.

But the message of Advent is that while we wait for God, we must be active. God is in control but God also calls on us to act.

Isaiah says, **“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.”** [Isa. 64:8] God has formed each of us, God knows us intimately and has made us for a purpose. Because we are the work of God’s hand, we are also empowered to do work. While we are waiting there is still work to be done, done by us.

Is God really absent from the world? Some might say that God is absent but we who put our faith and trust in God know that God is not absent – God is present in the world and God is present through us. God made us and formed us to do his work in the world. But God did not form us as puppets where God pulls the strings and controls our every movement. God is not a ventriloquist whereby we just move our mouths and God’s words come out.

God formed us as living beings, with minds of our own. God formed us with hands that we control and that we decide how we use or even if we use them. As we wait for God, we can sit back and just wait. A little like the servant who buried his master’s money so it would be safe. We could do that.

But the message of Advent is that while we wait, we also act. Our waiting for God should be a longing, a longing for God's presence, a longing that drives us to action.

When the angel came to Mary to tell her about the upcoming birth of her son, look how she responded. **“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”** [Luke 1:38] Mary was not just passively accepting the responsibility that had been given to her but she was welcoming it. “Let it be” is not a passive statement but it is an active desire to see something come to fruition.

As we approach Advent, this is the way should wait, with an active desire to bring on God's kingdom.

May this be our longing that drives us to action; our longing for God to break into our world and our lives.

Amen.