

<Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Mark 13:24-37>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Immanuel, our Rock and Redeemer, our Hope. Amen.

The time has finally come, right? After our readings of these past few weeks, parables about the coming of the Kingdom of God, we can now proclaim that, with the beginning of Advent, the time is here, yes? Sadly, no. For as much as we would like to be able to move right into the realization of it all, we are not there yet. And we are forced to wait...

When we bought our first house in Virginia, the first ever home that was ours to do with as we please, we were initially excited to pick out the paint colors and the curtains and everything else. This was mid-January, and while it was Virginia, it was still cold. Perfect time to do all the indoor tasks that needed attention, without having to first get permission from a landlord or a Buildings & Grounds Committee. It was energizing, and there was much to do.

But there was one project I was desperately anxious to get at: the back deck. When we purchased the house, this was a small, 10'x10' deck set on unanchored posts, with stairs that led away from the back yard. It abutted the house but was not attached to the house; if I stood in the middle of it and shifted my weight back and forth, the whole thing would move under my feet. I couldn't wait to tear it apart and build something much more solid, and much more in line with the vision we had for our backyard space: inviting, entertaining, and conducive to relaxation and laughter.

I'm Presbyterian and a minister, so I bought books on deck design and building. I made drawings to scale on graph paper. I planned out the supplies needed and price-shopped online to get an idea of how much this project would actually cost. I had pages upon pages of notes, so that I could be ready the moment it was warm enough and conducive enough for such a project. And I was excited.

But it was still winter, and even in Virginia, it was still not time.

For months I lived with a vision, and had no way to fully realize it. It was an envisioned idea which was yet to be fulfilled. I could look at it on paper, I could see it in my mind's eye. I dreamt - figuratively and literally - of the events with family and friends held in this wonderfully refurbished backyard space. And it remained out of reach.

Today marks the first Sunday of Advent, and we recognize a similar state of being, of an envisioned dream which has not yet been fulfilled or fully realized. And we begin this season with a promise, though it is not, perhaps, the promise we might anticipate. Rather than the promise of the new beginning that is to come, the realization of a kingdom for which we have only dreamt, the promise of today is of an ending. We begin this season of Advent with a reminder of the apocalypse.

Now, that can be a fearful way to begin. To mention the word "apocalypse" is to open the door to all manner of images of destruction, terror, and suffering. But these connotations are modern in their usage. In Greek, the word *apokalupsis* is from the root word meaning "to uncover, to reveal." To experience the apocalypse, then, is to begin to see and realize the new thing that will evolve from what is currently known; it is to see the envisioned dream begin to manifest and take form.

In Hebrew, the word becomes even more nuanced. Jacob's encounter with God, bearing witness in a dream to the reality of angels ascending and descending is considered an apocalypse. "Jacob was not experiencing the end of the world, but he was experiencing the end of his former perspective and a shift into a new one...His apocalypse was the beginning of his new reality..."¹ And in this new vision made manifest, in this dream made reality God is very much present and leading forward into the fullness of God's Kingdom.

This, perhaps, is why Jesus is so clear and unhesitating to describe what will happen prior to the realization of the Kingdom of God. In order for us to claim the vision that he is offering, in order to uncover and reveal the vision of what is to come, room must first be made for it. We must let go our current perspectives. We must first have an apocalypse.

It is important for us to understand apocalypse in this way. We need to understand that such an ending is not meant to terrify us at what may be lost but to shift our perspective onto what will be realized. It requires a giving up, though this is not to be considered a loss. Rather, it is an emptying of what is - fear, anger, hurt - so that we may again be filled with what is intended - connection, communion, nearness. To hold such an understanding allows us to maintain our focus on the vision we have received and not be distracted or forlorn at the fact that it isn't yet arrived. And in this light, we are enabled to wait.

This is not a passive waiting. This is not us sitting around twiddling our thumbs faithfully until all has been brought to fruition around us. Rather, this is a call, an invitation to active waiting, to participatory waiting. As we await the complete fulfillment of this vision of the Kingdom of God, we actively participate in making it more and more fully known in our own little spheres, our own little ways.

For instance: Fleming Rutledge, an Episcopal priest, tells the story of a stereotypical cul-de-sac neighborhood in December. Each house is decorated and adorned with lights and festivities. One house, though, belonging to a Jewish family - the only one of the cul-de-sac - adds one more decoration as the month goes on. A menorah in the window, lit each night with another candle as Hanukkah continues for them. Until one night when the house is vandalized. The window is broken, and the menorah is shattered on the ground. A swastika is painted on the house. This scene would be more akin to our modern imaginations of apocalyptic.

¹ [https://bibleproject.com/articles/are-you-ready-for-an-apocalypse/#:~:text=](https://bibleproject.com/articles/are-you-ready-for-an-apocalypse/#:~:text=,), Jacob's encounter with God is, of his confusion and dismay.

But, of course, that is not where the story ends. The next night - the very next night! - each house on that cul-de-sac has a menorah in the window, shining bright in the darkness. [*Advent, 2018, p80*]

And if that wasn't marvelous enough; if that wasn't enough a sign of light, of hope in the midst of darkness and ending in the world, then let us consider what had to happen in order to make such an act possible. Do we think that each of those non-Jewish households happened to have menorahs on hand? Of course not. Someone had to have had the idea. Then that someone talked to neighbors, who talked to other neighbors. Then someone figured out where to purchase menorahs in bulk, in the middle of Hanukkah. Lots of little decisions, lots of little actions that built, one on top of the other, until the whole street was lit up in solidarity, in community.

In this is the Kingdom of God more fully realized, and a clear vision is made manifest. It is not a one-time, grand scale act to do it all. It is all the little, daily acts that bring us closer, that bring the Kingdom closer. Francis of Assisi is said to have remarked, "Our job is not to change the world, but, rather, to change worlds." My world. Your world. The worlds of those who are around us, and those which we can influence. Even as we wait for the fulness of what has been promised and envisioned. In such a time, active waiting is just that: *active*. It calls us to be engaged, to be present, to be participatory in realizing - even to some degree - the vision and the dream for which we wait.

Our waiting will not be in vain, nor will it be empty. I spent those winter weeks in planning and preparation, and in time, the new deck was built and enjoyed. We dream, and plan, and practice living in faith and, in time, God will see the vision fulfilled.

On this First Sunday of Advent, as we again find ourselves waiting for the arrival of Immanuel, God-With-Us, this is our invitation: to actively wait. We are not forced to wait; we are invited to wait. We are invited to not only dream about the Kingdom that is to come, but to work, in little ways and little moments, to make it more of a reality. We are invited to hope, and, in that hope, to be filled with the promise of Immanuel. We are invited; let us live in the light. Amen.

(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)