

WATCHING AND READY

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Isaiah 64: 1-9 - Tear open the heavens and come down
Mark 13: 24-37 - Coming of the Son of Man and watchfulness

This is the first Sunday of Advent, and so according to our tradition we are celebrating hope today. The Christian understanding of “hope,” as we have been talking throughout the fall is something a little different from our conventional optimism or looking on the bright side of our culture. As Paul says, hope which is seen is not really hope. If we hope for what we don't see, then we have a true kind of hope and we wait with patience. So here's a hint for us from Paul about how we approach this waiting season of Advent beginning with the theme of hope. Like so much of our Christian understanding and our Christian wisdom, hope is something of a reversal of what is conventional in our culture. These scripture passages today give us a little bit of a hint, a pointer toward an understanding, of the kind of hope and the kind of waiting upon which we are embarking as we begin the Advent season.

The passage from Isaiah is just bleak. Many prophetic passages have expressions of promise, but this one doesn't. It's just calling on God with strong language as if to say “Rip open the heavens, come down. We've been hurting long enough. We recognize that it is the consequence of our own brokenness, of our own misguidedness, but we've surely been punished long enough. For God's sake come, be with us, put an end to this.” But it just ends with waiting and longing. So that passage sets something of a tone for the season of Advent. Rather than being an optimistic look at all the good things happening around us--an isn't-it-a-hopeful-world-we're-living-in look--it portrays a world that seems bleak and desolate. And out of the midst of that bleakness and desolation the prophet cries to God. It's almost a lament. So we begin Advent with this tone of lament.

We now add this passage from the apocalyptic section of Mark where Mark is talking about what we call the end, the coming. This theme recurs throughout the Bible and is often called “the day of the Lord”--the sense in which a time is coming when God will act, when these promises will be fulfilled. But it's not portrayed as a happy time. Jesus in Mark's gospel makes that very clear. This is going to be a terrible time, a traumatic time, and as the time approaches it's just going to get worse. We're going to see horrible things happening around us. Then Jesus tells us that, as the fig tree gives a sign of spring, we have to learn to see these things as signs of the imminence of the coming of God. So it builds upon the theme from Isaiah, this longing from the midst of the bleakness of life to seeing the bleakness itself, the desolation itself, as signs of the imminence of the coming and the action of God.

That's an odd picture. It's a difficult one for us to understand, and we're misled if we take it too literally and end up in the cosmic arithmetic of days and years and figuring

out when the Second Coming is going to happen. But if we look at it metaphorically it has a pattern which is one of the most common, familiar, patterns in human life. It's a metaphor which occurs throughout the Bible in various places talking about the time coming and the fulfillment of God's promise.

The pattern that I'm talking about is birth. We all know the pattern and many stories about birth. I'm talking literally now. I mean when a woman conceives and something starts to grow within her, and her life is taken over, not only her life but that of her whole family. The life energy is focussed on the nurturing of this new life. But it's not always a really comfortable, happy time. There are discomforts--I should probably get some women to come up here and tell some stories; then we would really get into the feeling of this. There are discomforts especially as the time of birth draws near. It can become even more and more uncomfortable, and closer attention is required. It's not a time to go off on some vacation in the Himalayas; it's a time that requires watchfulness and nourishing. But the discomfort is nothing compared to what is coming in the actual experience of labour. Jesus uses that metaphor in John's gospel: the coming of God, the salvation, being like a woman on the birthing stool crying out in that intense pain of labour.

Some years ago during the meeting of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver back in the 1980's, I studied with Maria Santiso, a woman from South America who was involved with a project of translating the Bible into Spanish. She was at the Naramata Centre teaching a course on birthing imagery in the Bible, and pointing out that this is a metaphor for creation, the creating of new life. It's quite different, for example, from the building metaphor we often use for the Kingdom of God. God's creation and recreation of the world is more like a birthing process, and so it has the sense that a time is coming which we don't control and which is not our schedule. That's what Jesus is trying to say: it's coming, you don't know when but you've got to stay awake, you've got to be alert, you've got to be attentive. And when you see the desolation around you, you have to recognize that those are the signs. Do you see how similar that is to the pattern of birth? It's coming, it's not going to be pleasant and sweet; it's going to be painful and horrible. And then, as Jesus points out when he talks in John's gospel, there's a contrast between the intensity of the pain and the incredible joy of a child born. That's the pattern, and it's a universal pattern of life.

Most of you will remember Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Travelled* which was published in 1978. I felt it was one of the profoundest spiritual writings of our time. He kept on writing and in 1993 published *A World Waiting to be Born*. What Peck was addressing was what he called the breakdown of civility. By "civility" he didn't mean just being polite to each other. He meant fundamental respect for one another as human beings--our honesty, our ability to come together in community and to create life the way it should be. So he was responding to the breakdown of community.

As we look around in our world we see breakdown in every dimension of our lives. There is breakdown in families that become estranged and have difficulties within their own situations, and there is the brutality of domestic violence. In the school systems we see the phenomenon of bullying which breaks down community for so many students and even makes it impossible for some students to go to school. School systems feel helpless as to how to deal with it. We find ourselves dismayed by what we see in government, not

because the people in government are wicked people, but because they are good people who seem to be turned into such depths of corruption. There's so much fear, and we're so defensive in relating to one another. We're so afraid of being left out, put down, broken.

The world of business has become so intensely competitive that people in the work place now have much less of a sense of loyalty to their companies. Many people who have worked for companies for years and years are suddenly laid off in the most disrespectful ways. And so that relationship of people to one another in work and business has broken down. We've even begun talking about bullying in the work place. People live with a terrible amount of tension in their work. And this happens even within the church. The church finds itself in court dealing with relationships among members of the church, or between ministers and their congregations, more than ever in the past.

So we live in a world in which the basic ability to achieve community, to build trust, truly to be together as a people, is in such jeopardy. This is what Peck was working on in his *A World Waiting to be Born*. He developed techniques, and an institution that developed out of that ran for a few years to develop tools for teaching the world to learn how to build or rebuild community and how to learn to respect one another again.

He said there are three key elements to that. The first is to learn to be able to look into the eyes of another person--any person, anywhere--and see someone who is precious and deserving of respect. The second is to see that preciousness of every being as based on the fact that he or she is created by a loving Creator. And the third element is to learn how to live our lives directed by the spirit of that Creator. Those three elements form the key to rebuilding that sense of community throughout our whole world. And that is what we mean when we use the word "peace"--to build peace in our world at all levels. But Peck looked at the world and he said this is already there but we don't see it. We see the devastation and the disrespect all around, but at the heart, at the centre--or perhaps we could say at the womb--of life is this new world of civility and community and respect waiting to be born. That's what Advent is about, isn't it, waiting for a birth that is coming, coming inevitably.

We've been looking at Marcus Borg in our little study group through the fall, and we're going to resume our study after Christmas. The most recent chapter we studied is called "Born Again." In that chapter Borg is saying we as liberal Christians need to reclaim the idea of being born again, not in a rigid narrow sense, but in the sense that all of us can tell stories about our lives. These stories may be of times when we seemed to have gone into exile, or when life seemed to have dried up, or when in some way there was something of a death metaphorically. And then something happened that turned everything around. We've been born anew; a new phase of our lives has happened. Borg says this being born again is something that can happen in big dramatic moments or in the regular cycles of life. It can even happen on a daily basis such that each day we are born again into life. And, Borg says, that's a kind of language we would do well to reclaim because it's at the heart of our Christian tradition. He also says the rebirth of our world is what we all, not just Christians, long for. He talks about pluralism, the challenge of so many different religious traditions in our world, and says if we are to learn to come closer and to build bridges between ourselves and other traditions we must look at what we have in common.

He points out that every religious tradition in many, many different forms, teaches the same thing about death and rebirth. Every religion has some form of dying to self and living to a new identity. Paul talks about dying to self and a Christ who lives in me. That's what we have in common throughout all the religious traditions of the world--this recognition that a universal characteristic of the human spirit is that life doesn't just progress along a nice, easy, smooth road; it progresses in this cycle of dying and being reborn, continuously.

This picture gives us a pattern or a metaphor to use as we approach Advent. At the end of today's passage from Mark, Jesus says keep awake, keep awake. He's talking about keeping awake in the middle of the night metaphorically, in the darkest moment of our lives, in the face of the deepest darkness and desolation of our lives. He says to stay awake, to keep watching, because it's in the midst of that darkest point that the tiny flame of God's presence begins to burn just as we lit one candle here today. One tiny flame begins to burn in the darkest moment, the middle of the night, when we need to stay awake.

And of course we can go back to the literal story of how many times when a baby was about to be born there were people staying awake all through the night--and many nights after that! So it's a time to keep awake. It's a time to be watching and ready for Jesus to be born, for God to be born into our world, for our world waiting to be born. It's a time for our world, and therefore for every one of us waiting for our own rebirth in this wondrous moment in the middle of the darkest and longest night of the year, when that tiny flame of divine presence and the promise of the rebirth of our world begins to burn.

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