

*Pleading and Waiting* – Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37

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First Sunday in Advent. If you've been around this season for a long time (liturgical season of Advent, not the December run-up to Christmas), you know the themes: Waiting, being on guard, expecting. Waiting, being on guard, expecting. We wait for God's return in the person of Jesus, we prepare ourselves for it, and we expect it to happen—we just don't know when.

These two texts today are a bit at odds when it comes to these themes, though. In the text from Mark, Jesus explicitly tells his audience that not even he knows when he will return; only his heavenly Father does.

Not even he knows. So, what should we make of that? If even Jesus doesn't know, what does that tell us about our quest to figure out when he will one day return?

Maybe we should let go of that obsession (if it's an obsession. Typically it's not for Presbyterians.) There are a number of Christian traditions that keep a good amount of focus on this issue: determining when Jesus will return. They read the Bible in such a way so as to make predictions of when the apocalypse will be upon us.

But again, Jesus said that not even he knows when that will happen. So if Jesus couldn't predict it, how can and why should we?

Too much energy is often spent on identifying when the second-coming will happen, often at the expense of what is going on in the world right now and working to making God's kingdom on earth one that God wishes it to be.

We know that God's kingdom has not yet been fulfilled when we observe the places or situations that don't match God's intentions for humanity or the world God created.

Let's name a few: Ukraine, the Israel/Hamas war where thousands of innocents on both sides have died, human trafficking in all corners of the globe, natural disasters that seem to take out segments of the population in places that seem the least capable of enduring such disasters, sickness and

disease that brings so much suffering to individuals and families, addiction and overdoses that kill thousands every year.

We could stop there, but there's more: domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, poverty that leads to homelessness and hunger, debilitating mental illness, a widening disparity between rich and poor, gun violence, and we could go on.

While we're grateful for our many blessings, the thought of all these challenges causes us to lift our voices in lament and, frankly, to call upon God to do something about it. And that's where these words from Isaiah today are so pertinent: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," he appeals to God, "so that the mountains would quake at your presence."

Isaiah pleads for God to intervene. He's one of the many examples throughout scripture of voices being lifted to God petitioning God to come down, to do something to correct the injustices all around us.

There's even a favorite Advent hymn that encompasses this theme: "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear."

O come, O come, Emmanuel! Come, Lord Jesus!

The voices are many pleading for God to intervene. It's a faithful and noble endeavor.

And yet, we wait. Our pleading doesn't seem to do much good. We don't know when that heavenly arrival will come.

William G. Carter once wrote about the great pastor and writer Eugene Peterson: "Eugene Peterson ... may have been a rock star of the spiritual world, but one of the slowest-talking people I've ever met. Peterson points out that nothing ever happens quickly in the church or the world, because nothing ever happens quickly in the Bible. But there is a kind of "apocalyptic patience" that is a basic characteristic of God's people. They hang in there. They stick it out. They are the kind of people who are "passionately patient, courageously committed to witness and work in the kingdom of God no matter how long it takes, or how much it costs."

We wait. And what do we do while we wait?

Jesus tells us what he told the disciples: Keep awake, stand guard for his return.

The mini-parable here in Mark of the man going on a journey and leaving his servants in charge, each with a job, including one to stand watch at the door and to not fall asleep, conjures up images in our minds of what it means for us to be on guard for Jesus' return. And it's intimidating, frankly.

Imagine standing watch at a door for a long period of time, likely overnight. It would be hard, if there's nothing going on, to not get sleepy. Our bodies would start to ache as we stood at attention, and our minds might become frazzled at the notion of staying focused so as to notice when someone important had arrived. How do we do it?

*The reason the household can be ready for the master's return is because everyone is working together, with their own jobs ("each with his own work") in community, and together they can stay alert.*

*We can remain alert (on guard for the coming of Christ) more ably when we are in community. As this Advent begins, it's important to prepare in community, watch for in community, and discern in community as well. Because while we may be confused individually as to whether we can know the signs or whether we just have to be in constant alert, when we live in community, we can figure out how to live in that tension and make our way together through the confusion. (Timothy L. Adkins Jones)*

As it is in every aspect of our faith, the notion that we can stand watch at the door and not fall asleep while we wait for Jesus happens easier when we're doing it together.

The other aspect of waiting lies not in Jesus' literal second coming, whenever that is. Together and individually we also wait for Jesus to come this Advent through the Holy Spirit. In these coming weeks, Jesus will come to us with words, or music, or people in our lives to remind us that he's here already.

And that only fuels us to be on guard for the blessing of each day. In the distraction that is the contemporary, commercial holiday season, let us together and individually be watching for Jesus bursting through all of the hoop-la with reminders to us of his goodness and mercy.

We are allowed, given license even, to raise our voices in lament. We can call on the name of the Lord—“tear open the heavens and come down!” And as we do, we wait—endlessly at times it seems. But we wait and are on alert—for Christ’s second coming whenever that happens, but even more importantly for his blessings that come our way in bits and pieces throughout the blessing of each day that we live.

And amid the difficulty of doing it alone, the good news is that we can do this together—the body of Christ—in the glow of Advent and Christmas, but also in the ordinariness of winter days that will follow.