

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Palisades, New York
December 2, 2007

First Sunday of Advent

The Hole in the Doughnut
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Weary, but not giving up hope!

Isaiah: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. Isaiah 40:31

If any nation had become accustomed to the constant presence of war, occupation, with few moments of domination alternated with occupation and exile – it was the Hebrews.

We read and study about their history in the hopes of discerning for ourselves the effects of faith (sometimes lack of faith) on a people over a long period of time. The researchers among us – and anyone who watches the TV series *Numbers* - knows that any study is improved by an increased amount of data and an extended period in which to observe the data.

From dates believed to be the 12th Century BCE up until the 2nd Century BCE, the Old Testament chronicles 1,000 years of faith in God and waiting on God -- replete with all the frustration and joy of such a cycle.

Waiting, anticipating, hoping that all will arrive as expected.

The longer the wait, the more weary folks can become; the more the hopefulness turns towards doubt and fear.

Isn't that part of the human condition? A race of beings with something of a short attention span coupled with demands for immediate gratification?

Yet, when we look – not at just our lives here, today – but at the history of humankind and our place, here, at the emerging edge of it – we see something happening. We note changes in many ways that have made our lives – and the prospect for those to come, better...

We also see, what needs to be done: the brokenness that innately draws us to compassion and healing; brokenness that sometimes “troubles us” into inaction, simply because it is too overwhelming to deal with.

So what do we do – either to address the needs or to somehow gain strength and perspective to not lose hope?

For many, we come here – or places like it – to worship, praise, seek comfort, guidance, gathered as one – so that we can go **out** from here to serve the many, trusting in the God we worship and rely upon to lead us; hoping with all our hearts that we are doing what will help to change the injustice or condition, all the while seeking God in our lives and the world – but not the end of the world. As in the Second Coming.

Do you think of the end of the world? Really? For the most part, that’s not what crosses my mind too often...

I figure that when my time in this form is done, I will be on my way, and the world will still be here – as it has been, syncopated to the rhythm of birth and death – as part of the broader symphony of creation and Creator: that which precedes birth and extends beyond death.

I do not live on the brink of the end of the world, in spite of global conflicts, possibility of nuclear wars, devastating potential of environmental change, or an errant asteroid moving this planet into a wobbling, apocalyptic waltz – a last dance, if you will. I live more on the brink of needed change – not ends.

And, you know, I don’t think that most people in the history of humankind have lived near the precipice of eschatological constructs, that is: principles or thoughts that focus on the impending end of the planet.

No, I think it is much more common to slip into a sort of parallel malaise to the end-time: an apathy that believes not that the world is about to end – but that there is nothing we can do about it...sort of an expiration of the soul; while the form, itself, continues in E.E.Cummings-like fashion: unbeing-dead.

That’s not us, though – even though we all have moments...

Today we move into the new church year that begins each December with the first Sunday of Advent (that is: waiting), we heard Carol read the Isaiah verses of this morning’s first reading of the lectionary for Year A:

In the days to come the mountain of God’s house shall be established as the highest of mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all nations shall stream to it.

As I read this again early this morning, I heard Isaiah's voice; the exhortation to

"Hold on to your faith, your hope, your loyalty – don't give up yet, an amazing time is coming when all your toils, trials, and snares will be over and you will find yourself in the rapture we have sought all these years..."

He might have continued: "Let go of what troubles you, for God is with you; fear not for the Mighty One will guide and protect you."

We don't really talk like that too much anymore. That's not to say that we do not hear such things in our hearts or that we aren't encouraged when we read the Scriptures. It's just that, well, we don't walk up to one another and say,

"Fear not! God is with you!"

OK, some places do, but in my life – maybe in yours – I speak in what I might refer to as the risen language of Jesus. For some reason, maybe the shift from Hebrew to Greek and Aramaic and into modern text; maybe just the familiarity with the language of the Second Testament over the first – for some reason the language of Jesus seems more familiar, easier to apply in modern times – if not always easier to understand.

The risen language of Jesus is many things, from a small quiet voice in our heart to the smile of a stranger that touches the Spirit. It is in the work we do in mission and ministry, to the songs we sing; it is in the prayers we say aloud and in private. It is in the very nature of our being – if not at first a reminder of Jesus, a pointer to the Creator of it all.

The language of Jesus is the modern admonition and exhortation of John that says,

"Do not let your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me."
John 14:1

It is the words of Jesus in Luke:

"Yet not a hair on your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives." Luke 21:18-19

The constant assurance of Jesus that everything is in God's hands and that we are not ever alone! Rely on God. Rely on Jesus. Rely on whatever God tradition you may follow if Christianity is not your path. But rely...

There are some friends of mine who talk about the inherent contradiction involved in "letting go and letting God." Newcomers to the idea liken practicing such a thing to becoming the hole in the doughnut – that is that if they keep

turning everything over to God – everything will be gone and they'll be like the hole in the doughnut – nothing!

What is easy to lose sight of is that we are everything when we rely on God to such a degree – not *no* thing. It may look like a hole in the doughnut, but in fact we are surrounded by God, having risen with Jesus to the point of a way of living and being that reflects what James refers to in 4:13-16

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

It is Psalm 46:10

Be still and know that I am God.

So, as we begin the new church year, the new lectionary season of Year A that takes us through Matthew's gospel, as we touch this first Sunday of Advent with the blanket of snow that has fallen this morning, a reminder that the curtain is about to rise from the covered earth with the birth of Jesus –

Let us wait, anticipate, and listen to our hearts in the stillness follows Matthew's call in this morning's gospel to stay awake to God in each and every day. Be present, remembering that personal initiative is no substitute for reliance upon God. And remembering, too, that we have no knowledge of the future – just one another – today.

Let go and let God. Be the hole in the doughnut – even just for a moment each day. The change might just be enough for you to turn to someone with a renewed sense of Jesus and say from deep in the language of Jesus:

Be not weary...there is much to give you hope! Come, join us! We have been waiting for you!

Peace on this Advent Day!