



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Longing for Light...We Wait in Darkness

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

November 30, 2008

First Sunday in Advent (Year B)

Isaiah 64:1-9

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Of all the ways to begin the season of Advent, this pleading cry of the prophet to God strikes me as the most vivid, the most real. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

There are no other words to begin Advent this year, because our longing is particularly real this year. We’re looking at the world around us and we’re discovering what Isaiah saw when he looked around in his day. He saw a world that was crumbling, a world whose very foundations were shifting beneath his feet. And he did the only thing he knew to do. He cried out for God to do something about it. He shouted to God, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down and fix this mess!”

In a very real way, Advent becomes a time when our longing merges with the longing of God. It’s a time of watching in anticipation for the coming of God’s promised reign. It’s a time of waiting for God to set things right.

We know about that waiting, don’t we? When your world’s crumbling, when you have nowhere to turn, the only thing to do is to look to the heavens and beg God to come down and do something about it. Though the words have been different, though we may not have used the exalted language of Isaiah, though our volume may have been more muted, we have filled the air with the same cry this year. And for good reason. We are keenly aware of the hurt around us—on Wall Street and on your street; in our own community here, where more of our neighbors are hungry or without warm clothing than any of us would believe; in nations around the world that are devastated by terrorism, as we have witnessed in India in recent days; in a world plagued with violence and despair and war—we know what it’s like to be a people who look around and see profound hurt.

You know it as well as I do. People keep looking at the world around us and saying, in one way or another, “God, tear open the heavens and come down.”

Our nation is at war and people are dying—tear open the heavens and come down.

Our family is breaking apart and we’re not going to make it—tear open the heavens and come down.

Our child is dying of cancer and we need you, God—tear open the heavens and come down.

All around us—even here in this sanctuary—people are longing for God to tear open the heavens and come down and save us. That’s what Advent’s about—watching for the signs that God’s kingdom is drawing near.

And, if you are anything like Isaiah, you wonder what God thinks of it all. You see, Isaiah remembered the days when “God did awesome deeds” that no one expected, and Isaiah, looking around at what he and his people were going through, wondered why God wasn’t doing anything now. What we see in these opening verses of chapter 64 is Isaiah’s

struggle to bring together the ancient stories of God's powerful presence with his present experience of God's absence. And what Isaiah wanted was what we want. We want God to move off the pages of scripture, tear open the heavens, and come down to save us.

Advent is the time when we long for the light. We wait for the promise of God to be realized in its fullness. And until then, we don't just hold up the past as nostalgia or dismiss the present in despair. No, we draw on the collective memories of God's people as a source of hope for the future. And we rehearse and remember those memories every time we gather at the font and table.

Just a few minutes ago, you and I stood tiptoe around the font where we had the chance to see a vision of hope. We heard again how Jacob belongs to God, and in hearing that about him, we had a chance to hear that about ourselves as well.

That sort of hope is hard to come by. I found out just how scarce it is last night. Sarah's best friend was baptized at the Catholic Church yesterday, and we joined the family for a celebration at their house following. There was another family with a newborn just 3 weeks older than Aaron who was also there. As I sat holding Aaron, I overheard two adults talking about Aaron and the other newborn there. And while they said the obligatory "they're so cute," they also said more. They began to talk about how they would hate to be one of those kids entering the world today, what with the terrorism and violence and terrible economy. I was a bit shocked. They were voicing the "death of hope," and their words seared my mind as I tried to imagine what word the church had to offer, what alternative vision of a better way.

What was surprising was that they had just left a service of baptism—as we soon will. They had heard the language of how God is breaking the power of darkness with light, and how this child was now walking in the light of the Lord. And we have just seen the sign of a child dripping with baptismal waters here today. We have heard again the good news: "Jacob, child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."

Amid all the signs of terror around us, we have been witnesses to a sign of hope. The sound of waters splashing is a call for us to lift up our heads and our hearts, for here is a sign of the heavens opening, and the Spirit descending, and the kingdom drawing near.

And soon, when we gather together to feast at God's Table, we will be reminded that as we eat the bread and drink from the cup we remember the Lord Jesus Christ—until he comes again.

At the font and table, we are reminded that God keeps his promises and gives us hope. So let us stand together to affirm what we believe:

God keeps his promises and gives us hope. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus God kept his promises. All that we can ever hope for was present in Christ. But the work of God in Christ is not over. God calls us to hope for more than we have yet seen. The hope God gives us is ultimate confidence that supports us when lesser hopes fail us. In Christ, God gives hope for a new heaven and a new earth, assurance of mercy and judgment beyond death. This hope gives us courage for the present struggle.