

“WAITING ON CHRISTMAS: Hope”

A sermon preached by
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Fordyce First United Methodist Church
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1 Corinthians 1:3-9^a ³ Grace to you and peace from God our father and Lord Jesus Christ!

⁴ I give thanks to my God always because of you all on the basis of God’s grace that has been given to you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in everything you may be made rich in him, in every word and all knowledge ⁶ just as Christ’s witness^b was confirmed in you ⁷ so that you all aren’t lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation^c of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will also confirm you until the end, blameless in the Day of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ God is faithful, through whom you all have been called into the fellowship^d of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

I heard a story this week about two ladies walking home from church. They were thinking about Sunday lunch and talking about the morning service. One of them said, “That was a great sermon on patience.” The other one said, “Yeah, but the preacher went five minutes long.”^e

Don’t worry. I don’t plan to go five minutes long this morning, but patience, *waiting* is hard, isn’t it? Today is the first Sunday in the Advent season. Advent means “coming,” and it’s a time of waiting, a time of preparing for the coming of Christ. We remember God’s promise to send Christ long ago, and we anticipate the day when he will come into our world again to bring in God’s Kingdom once-and-for-all.

This morning and over the next three Sundays, we will reflect on *how* God wants us to wait. The Bible has a lot to say about that. Next Sunday, we will consider how to wait on Christ peacefully. The following week, we will consider how to wait joyfully. On the fourth Sunday, the Sunday before Christmas, we will consider how to wait lovingly. Today we begin with waiting hopefully.

Isaiah 64:1-9^f I wish you would tear the heavens^g and come down so the mountains would quake before your face! ² As fire kindles brushwood, as fire makes water boil – to make your name known to your enemies, nations may quake before your face! ³ When you did fearful things we weren’t expecting, you came down; the mountains shook before your face! ⁴ For a long time, they have neither heard, nor given ear, nor seen a god except you (he acts for the one waiting on him!). ⁵ You have met with the one joyfully doing right. They remember you in your ways. Listen! You were angry, and we sinned in them a long time,^h but can we be saved? ⁶ But all of us are like an unclean thing. Like a dirty ragⁱ are all our good^j deeds, and all of us are drooping like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, carry us away. ⁷ Yet no one is calling on your name, waking up to hold on to you because you have hidden your face from us and melted us in the hand of our iniquity. ⁸ But now, LORD, you are our father. We are the clay, you are our potter, and all of us are the work of your hand. ⁹ Do not be angry, LORD, to excess, and do not remember iniquity for ever. Listen! Look, now, all of us are your people!

The story goes that a journalist was assigned to Jerusalem. She moved into an apartment with a view of the Wailing Wall, the last standing remnant of the Temple in Jerusalem. Looking from her window every day, she noticed an old, Jewish man praying. After many days, she went down and introduced herself to the man.

She said, “You come every day to the wall. How long have you done that, and what are you praying for?”

The old man said, “I have come here to pray every day for twenty-five years. In the morning I pray for world peace and then for the brotherhood of man. I go home, have a cup of tea, and I come back and pray for the eradication of illness and disease from the earth.”

The journalist was amazed. She said, “How does it make you feel to come here every day for twenty-five years and pray for these things?”

With deep sadness, he looked at her and said, “Like I’m talking to a wall.”^k

You ever feel like that, that praying is like talking to a wall? Even preachers feel that way sometimes. I’m excited about going to Israel in January. I’ve been brushing up on my history and geography. Papa went to Israel when I was a senior in college. That was sixteen years ago. After lunch Thursday, I dug out the box with all the stuff from Papa’s trip. I read his notes and his journal.

Papa visited the Wailing Wall while he was in Israel, and like the old man in the story, he prayed there. Specifically, he prayed for our family. My parents had recently divorced, and we were in distress. In all the chaos and turmoil we have been through since then, there have been many times when I have wondered if Papa wasn’t just talking to a wall. How often I have wished that God would just come down and fix it.

It’s hard to believe God’s in charge with the condition of the world being what it is. I mean, there we were Thursday, praying, thanking God for blessing us while terrorists were attacking and killing innocent people in India, holding hostages. Then Friday, that young man was killed when Black Friday Wal Mart shoppers trampled him to death, just to get low, low prices. The same day, two men shot each other in a Toys ‘R’ Us. Yesterday, I saw that a pregnant woman was killed, shot to death in a mall in Atlanta. That’s the Christmas spirit. If God is good and God is God, then why doesn’t God *do* something about it?

The guy that wrote this part of the book of Isaiah felt the same way. His people, the people of Israel, had cut God out of their lives. They worshiped the gods of success and excess, and they stomped on the backs of the poor to get more for themselves. God punished them for it. The Babylonians came. They destroyed God’s Temple and carried them off into exile.

Some fifty years later, Persia conquered Babylon. The Persian king, Cyrus, sent Isaiah’s people back home. What did they find? God’s temple was an ash pile. There were no city walls to protect them, no homes where they could live. Other nations were making fun of them. They started bickering with each other. Some people started thinking maybe God had abandoned them. If God is good and God is God, then why doesn’t God *do* something about it?

Listen to what he says again: “I wish you would tear the heavens open and come down so the mountains would quake in your sight, like fire kindles brushwood, like fire makes water boil, to make your name known to your enemies! Let nations quake at your sight! You *used* to come down when we weren’t expecting it, and the mountains shook at your sight!” He says, “Why don’t you do something about it, God?”

Then he shares the despair of his ontological alienation. You know what that is? I had a professor in seminary that told about a student who came to him and said another professor kept using this term he didn’t know what the professor was talking about. My professor said, “What is it?” The student said, “Ontological alienation.” My professor looked at him and said, “You mean Sin?” Ontological alienation means that we are radically separated from God, our fellow human beings, and the world around us to the very core of our being.

The writer felt utterly alienated from God. Listen again: “You were angry, and we sinned a long time. Can we be saved?” Have you ever been so wrapped up and entangled in your sin that you wondered if even God could save you? There was that habit you just couldn’t kick or that desire you couldn’t get to subside. He goes on to say, “All of us are like an unclean thing. Like a dirty rag are all our good deeds, all of us droop like a leaf, and our iniquities carry us away like the wind.” Sometimes we do good things for a bad reason and sometimes we’re trying to do the right thing, we mess it up. Why do you think there are so many books in the self-help section of the bookstore? None of them work, but we will grab onto anything to try to save ourselves.

If it’s not within us, then where will we find help? He tells us in verse 8: “Now, LORD, you are our father. We are the clay, you are our potter, and all of us are the work of your hand. Don’t be angry, LORD, to excess, and don’t remember our iniquity forever.” See, our hope isn’t in our money or our stuff. It isn’t in politicians. Our hope is in the one who made us. God alone can heal our hearts and the hurts of this world. Now is no time for despair. It is time to turn to God our father and to allow God to work on us and through us.

In one of his novels, Nikos Kazantzakis tells about four men who confess their sins to one another in the presence of the Pope. One of them, named Michelis, cries out, “How can God let us live on the earth? Why doesn’t he kill us to purify creation?” The Pope says, “Because, Michelis, God is a potter; he works in mud.”¹

There is good news and bad news this morning. The bad news is that we are all sinners. But the good news is that God loves sinners. There’s hope for you and me and this old, broken world. Will you put yourself into his hands this Advent? Will you let him put you up on his pottery wheel? When you feel like your world is spinning out of control, maybe it’s just him, retouching, remolding, remaking you in his own image. Will you let him do that?

I remember a story John Christie used to tell. Some of you could probably tell it better than I can. It was about a servant who had two pots. He hung them on each end of a pole that he carried on his shoulders. One had a crack in it. Every day, the servant would trek down to the stream. He filled both pots with water, but the cracked pot was always half empty when they got back to the house.

This went on for two years. The perfect pot was proud of itself, but the poor cracked pot was ashamed and miserable that it couldn’t do what it was made to do. One day the cracked pot spoke to the servant while they were down by the stream. He said, “I’m ashamed of myself and I want to apologize.” The servant said, “Why?”

The pot said, “For the last two years, I have only delivered half of my water because it leaks out on the way to the master’s house. You don’t get the full value of your work.”

You remember what the servant said. He said, “Watch while we walk back to the house. Notice the beautiful flowers by the path.” They went back up the hill, and, sure enough, there were beautiful wildflowers along the path. When they got to the house, the servant said to the cracked pot, “Did you notice the flowers grew only on your side of the path? That’s because I have always known about your flow, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we come back from the stream, you water them. For two years, I have decorated my master’s table with those lovely flowers.”

God doesn’t always fix the world. Sometimes God fixes us. Sometimes God takes advantage of our flaws to bring beauty to the world. That is our hope.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

^a Translation, Hammett N. Evans, 2008.

^b Greek: *martyrion*.

^c Or *disclosure*; Greek: *apokalypsis*.

^d Or *sharing*; Greek: *koinonia*.

^e Adapted from an original cartoon by Dave Veeman and Larry Thomas, *The Best Cartoons from Leadership Journal*, Volume 1.

^f Translation, Hammett N. Evans, 2008.

^g Or *skies*.

^h Meaning of Hebrew uncertain.

ⁱ Literally, *Like a menstrual cloth*.

^j Literally, *righteous*.

^k "Wailing Wall," Religious Joke of the Day, beliefnet.com (4-25-03); submitted by Jerry De Luca, Montreal West, Quebec.

^l Rick Ezell, *The 7 Sins of Highly Defective People* (Kregel, 2003).