

Advent One -- Mark 13:24-37 (The coming of the Son of Man) Advent Hangover – Waiting

There's a question that I was tempted to use to open this sermon – how many of you know how a hangover feels – but, I might not want to know the answer to that, so let's just keep it to ourselves and try something else. We are in a season of “more and more.” This weekend, probably many of you spent more time with your extended family or are planning on doing so during the Christmas holiday – as we are. Maybe you ate more and more – turkey, ham, potatoes, vegetables, breads, pies, etc. Maybe more than you would care to admit! Maybe you shopped more and more the day after Thanksgiving – maybe for the first time b/c w/all of the slashed prices, it would be the only way to have Christmas presents this year. Maybe you went out w/the early crowd and started at midnight. Or maybe your plan is to have more and more time with friends and family this year instead of presents. As you begin to pull out your Christmas decorations, clutter may pile up more and more – that's what happens to us the day after Thanksgiving when we put up our tree and decorations.

We find ourselves already stumbling into the Advent season and it's not quite the month of December! It's the season where excitement and happy times abound – most of the time. But more and more, this time of year is filled with other things. It's never an easy time of the year for those who have lost loved ones. It's the time of the year when more and more, their thoughts turn to those that aren't with them this year. With all of the economic uncertainties, advent is more and more a time of built-up stress and a different kind of wonderment. And, with recent news of civil unrest and uprisings returning to Egypt and other places, it makes us wonder more and more when the heck Jesus is going to come again. We may have a lot of wishful thinking during this time of year. We decorate our homes. We decorate the church. We sing. We wish. We wait. And, we are told to stay awake.

Advent, waiting and preparing for Christmas, sounds like a time that should warm our hearts, like a warm cup of hot chocolate. But, waiting can be a pain because we end up being hung over by yesterday's excesses – excesses of spending, eating, talking, anger, worry, or self-centeredness. It's hard to grab a hold of hope when we are nursing the effects of days gone by. When we are running from one task to the next, we can't grab the peace of the season.

I'm not going to talk to you about taking a break or slowing down because that's not always easy to do. It's about waiting. It's about waiting faithfully even with wars and terror raging in the world. It's about faithfully waiting amongst a growing number of people who don't have enough to eat and may even starve. It's about faithfully waiting when disease takes hold or when loneliness becomes your reality, when people argue and fight and our feelings are hurt. It's about faithfully waiting for Christmas, for THE Christmas when God did, indeed tear open the heavens and come down. It's about (big church word alert) the Incarnation of God, when

our creator said, “let there be light” to a small, sleeping, newly born baby boy who cooed away in a stinking barn.

Not many people GOT the first Christmas. Not all people of that time had an angel come to them and tell them that God’s very own Son had been born, the Savior of the world. I mean, how many people actually GET IT today? How many people actually realize we have a season of the church year that we call Advent? Don’t you think that the SEASON of Christmas gets in the way of the EXPERIENCE of Christmas? Jingle Bells usually drowns out John the Baptist declaring the way of the Lord. It’s easier to settle for a holly, jolly Christmas than it is to listen through the haze for the reason we wait, again and again, year after year, for the retelling of the birth of Christ.

Do we really listen as we wait? Do we hear the story told in Scripture? What do we hear? There’s a story about President Franklin Roosevelt and his handling of long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really listened to what was said. One day, he experimented. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, “I murdered my grandmother this morning.” The guests responded with phrases like, “Marvelous! Keep up the good work. God bless you, sir.” It was not until the end, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were heard. Without missing a beat, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, “I’m sure she had it coming.” People don’t always listen.

When it comes to spiritual things, we could blame it on God for our not being able to listen. God is not always crystal clear not does God speak in a user-friendly language. When was the last time you received a text from God that said, “UR Mine”? And yet, the prophets are pretty clear. Isaiah is pretty clear when he shakes his fists at God: “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at your presence.” He had nothing to lose. Isaiah and his people had a hangover; a hangover from too much waiting – too much silence.

God had freed the people of Israel. The people once held captive were allowed to go home. But it wasn’t a warm and fuzzy homecoming because everything had changed. They had to rebuild. People were missing, other nations were threatening them and there just wasn’t time for nicety-nice prayers. “Tear open the heavens and come down!” It sounds a lot like us – how we think we know what God should do, like we know what God thinks. They’ve seen God intervene; they’ve seen God split waters so that they can cross on dry land. They’ve seen it all.

We too, might find ourselves among Isaiah and the people. We’ve heard of the wonderful stories that God has done and we may look up, shake our fists and say, “Tear open the heavens

and come down again!” And we seem to be waiting, wondering where God is. Even the news seems to tell us that God is hiding. What about the violence among Wal-Mart shoppers as they took out pepper spray and even a gun to get the Black Friday deals? If you were to check out some of the new books in the religion section of Books-A-Million, there are a number of them that are written about how faith is NOT possible! It goes on and on and we want the mountains to quake and the nations to tremble at God’s presence. But, the heavens do not seem to open – it seems that there is limited hope.

Maybe there wouldn’t be if we pinned our faith on wishful thinking. But HOPE is another story. Christian hope is an odd thing – it’s what we find in between the reality of today and the reality of the not yet. Isaiah got that, just like many of the Biblical writers. Hope is not just a passive feeling it is a passionate action. Christian hope is expressed most vividly in the season of Advent in the waiting and in the season of Christmas – it’s grounded in the reality that Jesus came once in weakness and in meekness and WILL come again in great glory and power to redeem the world, to save it from itself!

Our Christian hope is an exercise in confidence in GOD’S future. Not confidence in our future or in our ability to figure out or pretend to know what God wants. So, as we rekindle the past each Advent by remembering what Jesus has already done, we also look forward to that which is not yet, the lights that lead beyond this life. That hope is heard in Isaiah with the use of one small word, YET – “Yet, O Lord, you are our father, we are the clay, you are the potter, we are all the work of your hand. . . we are all your people.” When all is said and done, the people of Israel craved a reality that they did not yet know.

In a past edition of the magazine “Christian Century,” Killian Noe, a woman who founded the Recovery Café in Seattle, WA shares her story. The café looks like a Starbucks – if someone has been clean and sober for 24 hours, they can come in for food and coffee. Sounds boring, doesn’t it? But, that coffee has power. One man said that he’d be dead if it weren’t for that coffee – he was an addict in the worst way when he showed up for a cup of coffee, but now, “They trust me with the keys to open and close, to get the coffee ready, sometimes all by myself. If I’m not here, people notice.” He has a new reality. Another drunk, a woman, ended up in Seattle after Hurricane Katrina – the coffee began to warm her up, and now she says that she’s learned “we’re not worthless people, as we’ve been told in so many relationships. Now, I can tell others that.” She has a new reality. Noe writes about how our messes, our hangovers (literally, in her case), our times of feeling God’s absence, can point to God’s presence. That happens as they wait for hope they can’t name, as they serve each other – that happens as they serve up new realities every single day. “You have to be broken to offer yourself,” she writes.

“The bread in communion has to be broken to be given away.” And, God tears open the heavens and comes down.

I don't have to tell you that there's a lot of broken in this world. You can probably point to things close to you that are broken in your family, your personal life, even in the church, and still you stay right there. Some of you will. Some will always overindulge in the complaints about what's wrong, what's broken and try to escape by leaving – only to find that what's supposedly wrong with someone or something else followed you. Yet, we are God's people. God may seem silent, YET the coffee is brewing, and a child is born.

And so, in the next four weeks, you are invited – to do what? Wait in the season of Advent – no matter what has happened to you in this past year, no matter if you feel in the Christmas spirit or not, you have the opportunity to drink up – to prepare to receive Christ all over again. You have the opportunity to discover once again where heaven has been ripped open and where God is dripping down into your life like a freshly brewed pot of coffee.

What part of your life, maybe a part that's filled with darkness, do you want God's presence to be born, for God's love to bloom? That's an Advent question. We could just go through the motions once again – sing our songs, light our candles, not really expecting much and reality will stay the same. Or, we can sing the songs and light the candles and go out into Advent expecting that God, somehow, somewhere, someday, will tear open the heavens and come down again.

If we are going to overindulge this season, overindulge in hope. Overindulge in prayer. Overindulge in giving and serving and all those things that Jesus teaches us. Chances are, those overindulgences won't make you dance with a lampshade on your head, but you just might wake up with the sweetest hangover of all – dancing with Jesus in your arms.

(EXACT ideas and phrases taken directly from *Advent Hangover* by <http://faithinflipflops.blogspot.com/> – absolutely LOVED it and needed to share it!)