

Willow Glen UMC Advent 1 November 27, 2011
Is 64:1-9; Mk 13:24-37

God did not wait till the world was ready,
till...the nations were at peace.
God came when the heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was deep and great.
God dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. God did not wait
Till hearts were pure. In joy God came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours of anguished shame
God came, and god's light would not go out.
God came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait til the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!
["First Coming" by Madeleine L'Engle]

I have to confess that I have some very ambivalent
feelings about this first Sunday in Advent. In liturgical traditions
like ours, the Scripture readings for this day always focus on
the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. Isaiah
cries out to God to rend the heavens and come down. And the

Gospel of Mark describes a cataclysmic event we are supposed to watch for, wait for, hope for. But these apocalyptic messages don't make much sense unless you're in a situation so desperate that the only way out of it is to ask God to put an end to it.

Until the modern age, that was just about everyone. The seventeenth-century English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, once described human existence in these terms: "nasty, brutish, and short." Without clean water or sanitation, without vaccines or antibiotics, for all but the wealthiest and the luckiest, this was certainly true. In Hobbes' day, the object was not to prolong this life with all of its suffering, but to secure safe passage to the next one. Only in heaven would there be no mourning, no crying, no pain anymore.

But modern people living in middle class America do not know the pervasive misery that people once knew. Or do they? When I last preached on these texts three years ago, I was

pretty sure that our modern ears couldn't hear the readings for the first Sunday in Advent the way a Thomas Hobbes or a John Wesley or a Charles Dickens could.

And then our bubble burst. Then the housing market crashed. Then the jobs disappeared. Then our neighbors lost their house. Then we lost our hope. Now, it's not only the poor and destitute who want God to tear open the heavens and come down. A lot of us want a miracle to happen, not just on 42nd Street, but on our street.

In this country, in this world today, we're not in a very good place, but we are in the perfect place. We are in the perfect place to understand Advent. Only folks who have dwelt in the darkness can really long for the light. Only those who have been through some hell really know how to cry out for heaven. So, if you don't already live there, I highly recommend that you find a way to enter into some situation of

hopelessness, so that you can enter into this season of blessedness.

Because, as Isaiah tells the people living in exile in Babylon, situations of hopelessness are exactly the place where the awesome unexpected happens, where the heavens tear open and God comes down.

Now, some of our youth went on a mission trip last weekend. They entered into many situations of darkness and saw some light. They got a taste of hell and saw some heaven. So, I figured they probably have as good a handle on Advent as any of us, and I invited them to talk to us.

[Here are the questions I asked the youth and their leader, Lisa, who were witnessing to the congregation:

Where did you see the darkness (the absence of God)?

Where did you see the light (feel the presence of God)?]

Concluding Prayer:

God, we don't live in the Tenderloin. We are not lining up at the soup kitchen, but many of us are crying out to you to come

down, to bring some light into our darkness, to bring a little heaven into our hell. We are so in need of some good news. We forget that you are the good news. And when we are most burdened, that's when you bring us the most blessing.

We thank you that our youth were willing to go to where the desperation is in someone else's life, to listen to their heart-rending stories in order to learn more about our heaven-rending God. We give thanks that you blessed them in that experience and through them, you have blessed us.

We pray for each person who received a meal, a smile, a handshake, a hug, a foot-washing and hope that your light will grow in them and will show them new possibilities for their life and health, joy and peace.

As for us, we thank you that we are in perhaps the best place in years to really receive you, to let you be the potter to our clay and to do some awesome unexpected thing with the mud and muck of our lives. We really need you right now, but we are willing to wait. We trust that you will come to us at the right time, when we most need it and least expect it.

These are the best of times and it's all because of you. In Jesus we thank you. Amen.