**Setting Aside Our Expectations**

Chrissy Westbury

ADVENT B1: Isaiah 64:1-9

November 30, 2014

Pewee Valley Presbyterian Church

When Joel asked me to preach during Advent, I was really excited! I love Advent: this wonderful month leading up to the celebration of Christ’s birth; a time of joy and anticipation. I love the rituals of preparation at church and at home – decorating, lighting the advent wreath, the music, the movies, the shopping, the baking! I refuse to watch Christmas movies or listen to Christmas music until Thanksgiving (except in the context of church choir, where you kinda have to get started on it…) But, as soon as the dishes are cleared after Thanksgiving dinner, all bets are off! The ritual first watching of “White Christmas” commences! The decorations go up. The baking of bread and cookies begins. And all of this happens with a nearly non-stop soundtrack of Christmas music!

And at church, the rituals continue. The church is decorated; the advent wreath is lit; the children are buzzing with excitement and expectation.

It’s Advent! The sanctuary is beautifully decorated with the signs of joyous things to come. We get to watch families light the advent wreath. We have four Sundays of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. We are in a time of anticipation and expectation. We look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. We wait with patience and excitement. The baby arrives exactly on schedule. All is right with the world… Right?

This is what we have come to expect of Advent…of God. We wait. God comes. The child is born. “All is well. All is well. Angels and men rejoice.” It all happens decently and in order, and in a nice liturgical package. But as I look around at the world we live in, I wonder if those expectations are realistic. Do we live in a world where all is well? I don’t know about you, but as I watched the news this week, I have my doubts. And I wonder, what are we waiting for?

The scripture I want to share with you this morning is about a world where all was definitely not well. It is about a community with dashed hopes and disappointed expectations. The Israelites had returned from exile in Babylon, expecting a restoration of their former glory. Instead, they were met with hardship. They expected the God who made mountains quake to set things right. Instead, they had to navigate tricky political and social waters as they attempted to rebuild a community that had been torn apart.

Their anguish had been met with silence from God. Their expectations, not met, gave way to resentment. They grew angry at a God who seemed to turn away from them when they needed God most. They used those unfulfilled expectations as fuel for their righteous indignation.

They cried out to the Holy One:

**Isaiah 64:1-9**

64O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

 2as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

3When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

4From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

5You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

6We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

7There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

8Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

9Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

The returning Israelites kept their hopes alive during all the years of exile by sharing the stories of the God who led their ancestors out of Egypt with plagues and pillars of smoke and fire; the God who tore down the walls of Jericho and has been the refuge and strength of God’s people throughout the generations. Surely this God will continue to act for God’s people in the same mighty, miraculous way.

Diane Jacobsen from Luther Seminary says, “All hopes were pinned on that return. Coming home to Jerusalem was going to mean the end of all Israel’s shame and discontent. However, things did not turn out so well. Problems multiplied rather than disappeared; ugliness and evil continued to exist.”

“Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” These are words spoken by people who can no longer feel the presence of God in their shattered world. These are the words of people who have experienced oppression, believed-for a moment – that they were released from that oppression, and have been crushed by the realization that they have not.

And the people waited. They sat back. And they waited for God to set things right. When God did not act in the way they expected, their resentment grew. And they acted out. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. Things did not go as they’d hoped. And they reacted in anger and frustration. It’s a vicious cycle, and really a bit of a chicken and egg thing. Which came first? Did the people sin because God hid God’s self from them, or did God turn away in anger because the people sinned?

“There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us.” The feeling of complete absence from God’s presence has led the people to give up hope, and to give up on the quest for relationship with God. They have turned so far away from God that they truly believe God has turned away from them.

In spite of their transgressions and in spite of the perceived silence from God, the people continue to cry out. They appeal to God as father and as potter. This is one of very few times the father imagery is employed when speaking of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. These images are meant to invoke a special care that God has for God’s people. A father would do anything to avoid his child’s pain, and a potter, having poured her energy and creativity into her masterpiece would treat it with utmost care.

The people are asking the same question we ask when tragedy strikes, when all is not well, when homes and businesses lie in ruins, cities burn, and young people’s lives are cut tragically short. Where are you God? How can you hide yourself from us NOW? When we need you most – WHERE ARE YOU GOD?!

But, this is not the end of the story. The lectionary only has us read Isaiah 64:1-9, but I want to push a little farther. You see, God deserves a chance to answer. And Isaiah 65 is God’s answer to the people:

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
    to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, “Here I am, here I am,”
    to a nation that did not call on my name.
**2**I held out my hands all day long
    to a rebellious people.”

This was not the answer the people expected or one they were prepared to hear. They believed they were crying out to God, but in truth, they are crying out to a god of their own expectations.

God says, “I am here. I am here always. I suffer with you and I reach out for you, even as you reach away from me.”

God is not only in the tearing open of the heavens and the shaking of the mountains. God is in the moments of compromise and reconciliation. God is in the pain and suffering.

 If only we can see.

In some ways, the situation of the ancient Israelites feels all too familiar, especially at Advent and Christmas. Our hope rests on the fact that Christ has come. God’s kingdom has been ushered in. But life somehow remains imperfect. The problems of the world are not solved, and we are not all that we should be.

Like the ancient Israelites we look for God in expected places. We wait for God to act in expected ways. We look for God in the manger, in the music, in the light. But we serve a God who works within the unexpected.

Last Sunday, Joel preached from my very favorite passage in the New Testament – the Christ Hymn from Philippians 2.

 **4**Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. **5**Let the same mind be in you that was[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians%202#fen-NRSV-29380a)] in Christ Jesus,

**6**who, though he was in the form of God,
    did not regard equality with God
    as something to be exploited,
**7**but emptied himself,
    taking the form of a slave,
    being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
**8**    he humbled himself
    and became obedient to the point of death—
    even death on a cross.

This is the God we serve. While we wait for God to act in expected ways, God reaches out to us through the unexpected.

Maybe it’s time for us to serve our unexpected God by doing the unexpected. Maybe it’s time to stop waiting and start seeking. Seeking justice. Seeking peace. Seeking others’ interests before our own. Seeking God in the face of a black teenager and in the face of a white police officer. In people so angry at systemic oppression that they lash out against whatever is nearby, and in the people who join forces to protect others against those who are lashing out. Seeking the sacred in each of us and in every moment – especially where we least expect to find God.

So, this Advent season, let us set aside our expectations and seek justice, seek mercy, seek peace, seek our unexpected God.

Amen.