

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
November 27, 2011
Isaiah 64.1-9
"Amazing Deeds"
Pastor John Guthrie

One enterprising man asked the Lord, "Lord, how long is a million years to you?" The Lord replied, "To me, a million years is like a second." The man asked, "Lord, how much is a million dollars to you?" The Lord said, "To me, a million dollars is like a penny." The man asked, "Lord, may I have a penny?" The Lord answered, "Sure, just a second."

Once again we enter the Season of Advent, the four weeks plus some days before Christmas Day. As it turns out, this year the Season of Advent is exactly four weeks. During Advent Christians all over the world enter a season of watchful waiting. No, not frantic shopping. That's why we have this reading from the 13th chapter of Mark's gospel today. (Remember by the way, that with Advent comes the beginning of a new year in the life of the church, and with the beginning of a new year we get a new primary gospel. For the next year, Mark will be that primary gospel.)

The 13th chapter of Mark is his version of the so-called synoptic apocalypse. Try saying that ten times fast. Luke and Matthew have their versions of the same Jesus teaching. Over the past few weeks we visited various parts of Matthew's version, so we won't belabor those themes today. I would simply remind you that all of these visions of the return of Jesus have a moral implication: follower of Jesus are to be watching, awake, and ready. Not watching in the sense of wringing their hands or going to great lengths to predict the day and the hour. Jesus tells us that the latter enterprise is a waste of time, anyway.

No, Jesus says to his disciples, and us. Rather, we are to be watchful, awake, and ready in the sense of slaves who are left in charge of their master's estate while he goes on a long journey. The master may return at any time, so we are to be about the master's business. As we saw last Sunday, a large part of that business is caring for those among us who are hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, sick, and imprisoned.

Advent is a rather odd season, in that it has two intertwined but totally unique themes. First, we remember the most precious gift the world has ever received, in the birth of a child, who was more than a child. A child who grew into a man as all children do, but who was more than a man. He was and is the God-Man, the Son of Man and the Son of God, the Messiah or Christ, the Anointed One who came and who still comes to take away the sin of the world. So that's the first theme of Advent.

The second one is this idea of watching, waiting, being ready, loving and serving in the name of Christ until the Day of his return. And we are certain that he will return.

This morning I want to spend a few minutes with you exploring this amazing lament that we have in the 64th chapter of Isaiah, written during another time of anxious and agonized waiting. The context for this waiting is set in chapter 63 of Isaiah, and indeed in the few verses that follow our reading for today.

Hear what Isaiah writes in those verses following our reading from a moment ago, chapter 64 verses 10-12:

Your holy cities have become a wilderness,
Zion has become a wilderness,
Jerusalem a desolation.
Our holy and beautiful house,
where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned by fire,
and all our pleasant places have become ruins.
After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord?
Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?

There is only one historical event during or before the time of Isaiah's writing that can correspond to this horrific scene, and that is the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and its temple by the Babylonian army in 586 BC. The biblical record reflects an appalling loss of life at the time of Jerusalem's fall. That destruction and bloodshed was followed, of course, by the removal of the remaining elite and ruling classes to Babylon, the exile of the Israelites. A large fraction of that leadership had been removed and exiled some ten years earlier. Now the rest of them are carried away.

Jerusalem lies in ruins. The temple has been burned. A large fraction of the people of Israel forcibly removed, hundreds of miles into exile. So Isaiah, along with all of his people laments.

You were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We 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.
There 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.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.
After all this, will you restrain yourself, O LORD?
Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?

Note that Isaiah takes the unique step of blaming the LORD for the sin of his people. Yes, they have sinned, transgressed, and fallen away. But at least in part, Isaiah cries, that's because the LORD was angry. The LORD hid himself. The LORD delivered his people into their own wickedness. The interpretation of passages like this one in the Hebrew Scriptures is not at all simple. But one way of looking at them is through the eyes of a people and a prophet whose hearts have been broken, whose wills have been crushed, whose hope has been trampled.

This lament is the cry of a people who wonder why their God seems to have abandoned them. In some way, they believe, the LORD shares in their sin. How else can they explain their utter and complete defeat, humiliation, and abjection? One thing we know from passages like this one is

that we are also allowed to implicate and accuse the living God. God is big enough to take whatever we can throw at him. If you ever have any doubts, read the book of Job once again.

But Isaiah doesn't just lament. He also recalls the LORD's providence and steadfast love for his people in times past. Indeed, throughout chapters 63 and 64, there is a remembrance of Adonai, the LORD, leading his people out of slavery and misery in Egypt. In chapter 64 verse 3 Isaiah refers to "awesome deeds that we did not expect." "O," he cries, "that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The mountains quake and the nations tremble at the LORD's presence. No eye has seen or ear has heard any God but the LORD.

These passages of lament very often recall in times past how the LORD has cared for his people, guarded his people, fed his people. Why, they then cry, are we forgotten, shunned, and rejected today?

But notice how the passage ends. Isaiah refers to the LORD as the Father of his people. In spite of their suffering, God is still their Father. Isaiah knows that Adonai can no more reject his people than a Father can reject his children. So he hopes, in active and passionate waiting. As do his people.

You and I also face long periods of trial during our own lives. We suffer from illness or the desperate illness of loved ones. We face financial ruin and hopelessness. We encounter conflict with family and with close friends, and we watch members of our families pursue destructive and pointless courses. We or our loved ones fight addictions and sometimes catastrophic behaviors. And we cry, "Why? Will you keep silent, LORD, and punish us so severely?"

Isaiah remembers the awesome deeds that the LORD performed in generations past. And indeed, the LORD has and does and will act in those ways. But during this Season of Advent it is helpful for us who are also waiting, lamenting, and suffering, to remember that the LORD also comes to us in the weakness and vulnerability of an infant. That the LORD comes to us also in wondrous humility. That the LORD comes to us to suffer alongside and with us. That the LORD comes to suffer even the humiliation, degradation, and unimaginable pain of death on a cross.

So it is that we wait and watch for release in amazing ways: powerful ways and humble ways. Remembering above all that the LORD who tears open heavens and who makes the mountains quake and the nations tremble is the same LORD who was nailed to a cross for that iniquity, our iniquity, that Isaiah acknowledges. The LORD who suffers with us.

So wait and watch and be ready. The LORD has done amazing deeds that we did not expect. And the LORD will do them again.