

The New Way Home, December 10, 2023, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Isaiah 40.1-11; Psalm 85.1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3.8-15a; Mark 1.1-8

“[W]e are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”

Prayer

The season of Advent is a strange one—and yet we continue celebrating it every year. It’s not quite like Lent (though the two are definitely related) where we know it is about sacrifice and we can talk about what we “give up”. In both seasons, we are waiting for something at the end that is pretty special. With Lent, we wait for Easter, we can say “alleluia” again in worship, we get Easter Bunnies and chocolate and a celebration of new life as we recognize Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

But in Advent, though we also have a defined time of waiting and preparation, when we acknowledge that it is at least as much about waiting for Jesus’ *return* as it is waiting for his arrival in the manger, the end date is a little more questionable. We are still waiting for Jesus to come back. It’s been a long time, now, and he still hasn’t returned. And yet, each year, we participate in a defined season of Advent that has a beginning, and an end. We stop recognizing Advent on Christmas Day, when we celebrate Jesus’ birth. But we’re still waiting for Jesus’ return. So, why does Advent stop? And, why would we start it each year not knowing when it will really end?

One explanation is that waiting is a discipline that we can practice. Much like the fasting and prayer and almsgiving that we are encouraged to do throughout the season of Lent, in Advent we practice waiting and preparation. We are reminded to watch and to wait. As we heard today, the day of the Lord will come like a thief. We will be surprised, so we need to be ready.

And we need to *practice* waiting, because none of us are very good at it. And nobody really likes it either.

And yet, when it comes to waiting for Jesus to return, nobody has yet had their patience rewarded. We are all still waiting.

I think it would be useful to consider a different approach—to think about the discipline of Advent in a new way. That we are waiting for God to show up—for God to show up *for us*, again, as God has done before.

We know now to expect that baby Jesus will be in the manger on Christmas morning. We also know that *one day* Jesus will come back, in the Day of the Lord, but that is the same day that people have been waiting for since Jesus left the first time. In fact, in the reading we heard from the second letter of Peter, people had been waiting anxiously for Jesus’ return for a long time already. Biblical scholars suggest that 2 Peter might be the most recent (or *one* of the most recent) books of the New Testament, written as late as 130 of the Common Era. If that’s the case, then people had been waiting for 100 years already for Jesus to come back! No wonder they had to be comforted with the notion that for “the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.”

But what about the in-between times? Do we really go through this whole Advent season every year waiting for only *two* potential arrivals of God in our world? The first that happened two thousand years ago when Jesus was born, and the second the return of Jesus that we’re *still* waiting for?

Or are there other ways that God is made manifest in the world? Do we have evidence of other times that God has shown up for the people of the world through history?

And, is there any reason to *hope* for God showing up for us *now*, in some other way than just that long-promised Day of the Lord where Jesus returns?

I mentioned something a few minutes ago that I don't often bring up from the pulpit: the dating of scripture by Biblical scholars. As I mentioned, second Peter is thought to have been written as late as 130 of the Common Era. That poses some problems, of course, the first being that Peter would have been dead for decades before that, and couldn't possibly have written that letter.

But the more pressing issue for us today is that thinking about the *context* of when a Biblical text was written, and the audience it was originally intended for can change the whole way that we understand a text.

Our Bible Study groups have heard lots about this already, as this is a main topic of conversation as we look at the book of the prophet Daniel. But it's not something I often bring up on a Sunday morning. And if we look at the texts that we heard this morning, we'll find that there is something very important to us in this moment.

If you are like me, then you probably consider the scriptures to be written kind of like a nature documentary—the camera is floating in the air with a wide angle shot of everything that is going on and David Attenborough is narrating the whole thing. We read the text as though it was recorded live, in real time, and with a video camera. The camera doesn't lie, and we wouldn't dare question the perspective of *Sir* David Attenborough.

We don't often think about it, but that's certainly *not* the way that the scriptures were written. Even the four gospels which we (rightly) hold in such high esteem, were not written as-they-happened, but rather recorded much later (decades, probably) from memories and eye-witness accounts and stories that had been passed around. Most (if not all) of Paul's epistles would have been written *before* the gospels, which means that Paul wouldn't have had the gospels to rely on when he was travelling and teaching. There were no New Testaments that Paul could have left in the new churches that he helped found. The stories of Jesus were still passed by word of mouth.

Why that's relevant to today is that we looked this morning at the opening verses of Mark's gospel. We're going to be spending quite a lot of time this (liturgical) year in the gospel of Mark. But what we rarely consider is *who* Mark wrote that gospel for, *when* he wrote it down, and *why* he felt the need to write it at all. (And, besides all that, if it really was someone named "Mark" who wrote it at all, since we're not even confident about that.)

Context is important. The timing of Mark's gospel is relevant—but so is the timing and context of the reading we heard from Isaiah. We heard the reading from Isaiah opening with, "'Comfort, O comfort my people,' says your God." Mark's gospel begins with "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." Both seem so uplifting, so encouraging.

And indeed they are. Both of them. We take comfort from those words today. God is seeking to comfort God's people in Isaiah. And Mark's gospel is eager to introduce us, right away, to the Good News of Jesus, and introduces him as the Son of God.

What we miss, though, is that both these passages were written in very dark times. The order to “comfort” the people of God or to share “Good News” was a very tall order.

Isaiah was writing to a people who had been in captivity for decades. They were still lamenting the destruction of their city and its temple. They were struggling to hold on to hope that things would *ever* get better. The call from God through the prophet to “make straight the way in the desert” would have reminded them of their history—the Exodus from Egypt. They were to think about a journey to the Promised Land—only *this* time, it would be a return. And the road would be straight, the mountains would be made low, and the valleys would be filled. They would not spend decades wandering around in a wasteland, but make speedy progress through the desert in their return to their own land. The message for them to hope and to trust in God would have been difficult to hear, when the promises seemed so unlikely to be fulfilled, and such a remote possibility.

Likewise, the people hearing the Gospel of Mark would have had a hard time believing that there was any Good News about Jesus. After all, he had said that he was coming back, and he still hadn’t. And things had been going quite badly for those who believed in Jesus. There was a war with the Romans, and once more, Jerusalem was in danger and the temple would, again, be destroyed. This was right around the time that Mark was writing. His attempt to encourage the believers was a very tall order. How could they believe that things would improve? That the persecutions faced by the Christians would cease? That the executions would stop? That Jesus would *actually* return again, when it had already been so long?

The reason I bring all this up is because *this* Advent, more so than many others in recent memory, is a difficult time to see *hope* in the world. We all know about the major wars that are continuing in the world, and that seem unlikely to end soon. We know of other conflicts brewing around the world too, even if the current wars don’t end up dragging more countries into them. We’ve seen the pictures of suffering.

And on top of all that, closer to home, our own church is facing challenges of its own. We are facing a significant budget shortfall and are going to have to think quite creatively about how we can address that. The future of St. Timothy’s will *not* look like it does now. We are entering into uncharted territory. And it’s more than a little worrying.

But we are not alone. Yes, God is with us. God is *always* with us. We will not be left abandoned. But more than that, though I just said that we are in uncharted territory, we are in completely familiar ground, as far as the church goes. This is not a new problem. The people in the first century were concerned about their church in the present day (before they had any thought of the church of the future). Would they survive? The church and its members would need to struggle to survive the persecution. But the story had been true before, when the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon (and before that, under slavery in Egypt). Would they *ever* make it home again? Would they live to see God’s glory restored?

Our scriptures encourage us today, as they have the people of God for thousands of years, even in the bleakest of situations: God has been gracious; God’s words are peace to God’s faithful people; God shall indeed grant prosperity, though it may not be in the timing we would like. God’s timing is not like our timing, for a thousand years to God are like a day, and a day like a thousand years. But God is faithful. And God calls us to hear the voice of the one who *still* calls out today: “make straight the path in the

desert. Lift up the valleys and lower the mountains. Even the ground and clear the rough places. For the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it.”

We will be making our way *home*. And that path will be smooth sailing. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.