

Somethin's Comin'

Isaiah 64: 1-9; Mark 13:32-36

First Sunday of Advent, Nov. 30, 2008

Whitefish UMC

- † Welcome to Advent. Listen to these words from Leonard Bernstein's song from West Side Story, "Somethin's Comin'"...
- † Can you feel the anticipation building, the longing for something wonderful to break into ordinary human existence? How long has it been since you've expected something so exciting in your life or in our world?
- † In his book, *Secrets in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner remembers his own childhood waiting. His grandparents used to send him an Advent calendar with little windows to be opened every day revealing a toy, a candy cane, a teddy bear.
- † He could feel the excitement building as it grew closer and closer to Christmas Eve, and he opened the last door revealing a stable and a tiny baby asleep in the straw. Elderly now, he still remembers how on Christmas morning we would drive into New York City, where our grandparents lived, and along with my father's two brothers and their families we would start waiting all over again in the dim hallway of our grandparents' apartment—until finally our grandfather appeared and opened the door onto unutterable magic—a whole Arabian Nights' worth of treasures with the lights of the tree glimmering and cider and German Christmas cookies.

And so many presents they had to set them out all around the walls with a pile for each of us marked with our name. It was worth vastly more than all the weeks we had spent waiting for it, and though I've long since forgotten almost every present I ever got, I remember still the dazzling light of it and the presence of all those people I loved and who loved me, and the feeling that life simply could never get any better than this, and the almost unbearable excitement of it.

- † Yet darkness ultimately filled that same room that had held such magic and joy. Buechner's father committed suicide not long after, and his grandfather soon died of a broken heart. A few years after that, his father's youngest brother committed suicide, too.
- † He writes: "There was not Christmas enough to save the day. There was not Christ enough—not just for my family back then, but for all of us, now and always." (Christian Century, December 13, 2005)
- † And so we begin Advent with a cry for help, with an acknowledgement that there is a vast contradiction between the bright lights and glitter of this season and the depth of human suffering and longing in the world.
- † We hear the ancient words of the prophet: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." Or as John Buchanan puts it, "Dear God, help me please—the basic, primal, human prayer, which, sooner or later, every one of us prays."
- † The prophet Isaiah spoke these words when the worst had happened for the people Israel. They wondered why God had handed them over to their pagan enemies Assyria (in 722 BCE) and Babylon (in 586 BCE), who defeated and humiliated them.

- † “Our holy and glorious temple,” Isaiah cried, “has been burned with fire and all that we treasure lies in ruin.” Their nation was gone, their proud army defeated, their beautiful city and temple were destroyed, and they were held captive in Babylon.
- † Of course it’s not quite that bad for us. But for some of us, it may feel like it. Our world may indeed seem to be crumbling around us. For some of us, and for people we know and love, the upcoming Christmas season may not be so merry. Jobs have been lost, retirement funds shrunk, loved ones are gone.
- † The season of Advent, with its theme of waiting in the darkness, may seem all too relevant to us this year. For many of us, there is a disconnect between what the culture and its advertising tell us to long for and the reality of our lives.
- † And don’t you find that the television ads ring a little hollow this year with our economy’s prevailing downturn? The other day a reporter asked President-elect Obama whether he and his family were going to go Christmas shopping over the Thanksgiving weekend and whether he would encourage other consumers to do the same.
- † President-elect Obama smiled and acknowledged that indeed his daughters Sasha and Malia had made their Christmas lists and they would be doing a little shopping. But he stopped well short of telling everyone else to go shopping, too.
- † Who feels like shopping, like celebrating, when life seems so uncertain in these days? Perhaps you are plunging forward into the season, and that’s great. But maybe it’s not so easy for you this year. And you are not alone.

- † What is it that we are waiting for this year? Is it the light at the end of the tunnel? Or is it, in fact, the proverbial oncoming train? Or, when a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, do you follow the advice of Corrie Ten Boom? “you don’t throw away the ticket and jump off, you sit still and trust the engineer.”
- † We want to trust the engineer, don’t we? But sometimes there is a painful disconnect between what we fervently pray for and what we actually experience.
- † Praying to God for mighty acts of deliverance is an entirely human and genuinely Christian response to the suffering of the world. I don’t think I could ever stop praying for God to rescue Congo and Zimbabwe from the violence and evil ravaging those lands.
- † What parent doesn’t lie awake at night praying that their teenaged child makes it home safely from a party? Who wouldn’t pray fervently when they see a police car pull into a neighbor’s driveway?
- † Haven’t you ever prayed “Lord, wake up! Come down!” But underneath these pleas for divine intervention into our lives and our world is the reality that God is not our Cosmic Concierge. As Daniel Clendenin puts it: “Human experience belies the delusion and pious happy talk, so deeply embedded in...our sense of entitlement...that the Gospel solves every problem and answers every question.
- † Rather, God offers us a way to live without answers to questions and with problems that don’t disappear. Advent reminds us that sometimes we must wait, and that God acts in [God’s] own time, in God’s own ways, and for God’s own reasons.”
- † In an Advent meditation, John Stendahl asks, “Why again these candles and this ritualized longing? If after all this time under an

unbroken firmament God has not come down, would not existential resignation be more honest and enobling?”

- † I don't know about you, but I don't want to settle for existential resignation. Of course you can't help, if you're honest with yourself, saying, “Well maybe this whole God made flesh business is just baloney. How do we know we're not just kidding ourselves, trying to make ourselves feel better?”
- † But I hold to the sense that when I pray with all my heart the words, “God help me,” there is an answer from a loving, creating, renewing presence beyond anything I can describe adequately. Of course the answer doesn't come in a bolt of lightning or even the way we'd like it to come.
- † But we wait in patience, knowing that God does come—not in fire and thunder and with the sound of trumpets. Jesus compared his coming kingdom to tiny mustard seeds and to the almost unseen but certain fermentation of yeast.
- † Yes, in the birth of a child in an out-of-the way town to poor people, God did come down. Over the baptism one day in the Jordan River, God did tear open the heavens and send his word of blessing and favor over Jesus.
- † As Jesus walked the dusty roads of Galilee healing the sick, restoring the outcasts, feeding the hungry, and welcoming the stranger, telling us that it is better to give than to receive, to give our love and our lives away, forgiving even as we are forgiven, the people felt God's presence.

- † And when he was killed for his love and his new kingdom ways, and he died in faithfulness to all that he had taught and lived, God did come down again and tear open the heavens.
- † When on the third day the women found that even death could not contain him, when the very love and power of God defeated the powers of sin and death, the powers of violence and injustice, when that child, now a man, rose up and walked into the light of the first Easter, God definitely, once and for all, answered our universal prayer of “Help me.”
- † Jesus, though, warned his friends that they might just miss the coming of God into the world. “But no one knows,” he said, “the day or the hour when God will act, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son.”
- † He compares our situation to servants who wait for their master who has gone on a long journey without saying when he’ll return. Our task is to remain vigilant and to watch.
- † Don’t mistake patient waiting for an excuse to avoid helping those who need our help. But there will always be plenty of unresolved heartaches this side of heaven that require us to cultivate endurance, confidence, and hope through waiting.
- † Yes, sometimes we look for God in all the wrong places and expect the wrong kinds of divine intrusions. No one much noticed the birth of a baby in Bethlehem in a manger in the back of the busy inn.
- † “Stay awake, be alert, watch.” These are the words of Advent. For God comes, will come again, in unexpected, quiet ways and only the watchful and mindful will see.

- † Remember the little boy Frederick Buechner whose brilliant and radiant Christmas memories were tarnished by the death of his father, grandfather, and uncle?
- † Even after all the pain and loss, he concluded, when writing a book about an ancient monk named Godric: “What’s lost is nothing to what’s found, and all the death that ever was set next to life would scarcely fill a cup.” That’s what Buechner wants written on his tombstone.
- † Yes, “somethin’s comin.”” But it may not come in the driving beat of Leonard Bernstein’s music or the words of the eager Tony in West Side Story. Instead it may come in the words of the classic Advent hymn by Phillip Brooks, O Little Town of Bethlehem:
- † *How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessing of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in.*
- † This Advent, pay attention to the coming of Christ again in your life. Sing a carol, offer kindness to a stranger, spend some moments in quiet waiting.
- † Christ will come again. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources: John Buchanan preached a wonderful sermon on this scripture, and his reflections inspired many of my thoughts. “Dear God, Help!”

www.fourthchurch.org

Religion and Ethics Weekly, Profile: Frederick Buechner, May 5, 2006

www.pbs.org

Daniel Clendenin, “Awesome Things That We Did Not Expect,”
www.journeywithjesus.net

Mike Eldred singing “Something’s Coming” from West Side Story by
Leonard Bernstein