

First Sunday of Advent – Year B – November 30, 2011 - Homily
Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37
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I love this story as told by Will Willimon. He writes, “Someone told me about a friend who had been asked to preach in the church of one of the famous television preachers whom millions watch every Sunday. On the way from the airport, the guest received these instructions: ‘People worship with us in order to feel good about themselves. Therefore, don’t mention the cross in your sermon. And don’t dwell too much on sin’ Television does set certain limits on today’s successful preacher, doesn’t it? So does the spirit of the age.” It raises an interesting question. How precisely would we describe the spirit of our age? Is it one of optimism or denial? On the other hand, do you think it’s more like, every man and woman for him or her self? Is there a pervasive culture of death and despair, especially amongst our younger members of society? Alternatively, with things like the Occupy Wall Street movement, do you see a new generation awakening to injustice with a true desire to reform unjust and oppressive systems? Are they really the 99%, or just angry with those they call the 1%? The cynic in me wonders whether these folks are just p.o.’d about the fact that they haven’t got what they obviously want. Perhaps the day they fall into the currently despised 1%, they’ll immediately switch tack, and muzzle their protestations! I’m genuinely curious as to what you think

Isaiah has an interesting twist in his account of the Israelites perceptions of the day. Listen closely to what he says to God, “But you were angry, and we sinned; *because* you hid yourself *we* transgressed.” Sounds like Isaiah wants to lay most of the blame for the Israelites’ bad behavior on the silence and absence of God doesn’t it? In fact, if I were to sum up the spirit of this age, I’d probably include at least some reference to pointing fingers and finding someone else to blame. It seems that many in our society, and that includes many of us who come to church, have a hard time accepting our sinfulness. We point at God or others and say it’s all their fault, when really we’re in denial about the consequences of living in a way that amounts to ‘my will be done’, rather than humbly praying for God’s will in our lives.

Nonetheless, Isaiah remains faithful to the truth that God’s steadfast love will prevail. In classic fashion, the prophet’s lament includes a recounting of the glorious deeds that God has done on behalf of the Israelites. It’s the ancient equivalent of counting our blessings. It’s about being awake and aware enough to notice God’s activity and presence throughout our lives. The truth is that God doesn’t remove or limit our free will by forcibly restraining us from our stupidity and selfishness. However, God is very much in the habit of letting us live with the consequences of our actions, in order to help us realize that there is a better way. And in case there’s any doubt here – that better way is His way in imitation of His Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is simply how God relates to His children then, now and always. God teaches us that we must walk the vulnerable path of non-coercive love and suffering service. It is also true of God that dominating force, and the abuse of power will never cut it. This is the way of Jesus Christ, the suffering servant of Isaiah’s prophecies, and the reality embodied and reflected in His life and on the cross. Yet God never leaves us without hope or promise, because God loves us, and is faithful to all His children. Our hope is in the promise of the resurrection. We embody that hope in the forgiveness of our sins, our healing, and the blessing of our assured salvation through God’s grace and our faith in Christ Jesus. This is the Good News of Jesus Christ, and our mission is to share it.

Isaiah finally gets to the truth of the matter when he humbly notes that we are all just clay in

the hands of the Master Potter. The relationship is such that we cannot control God in any way. God is sovereign and God's will will be done. Whether the spirit of the age is unbridled optimism or deepest despair, our mission has not changed. Advent offers us an opportunity to lament a broken world, not in a spirit of hopelessness, but with a renewed commitment to continuing our ministry and mission of reconciliation as members of Christ's Body. Also, with a renewed openness and awareness, anticipating and expecting the movement of the Holy Spirit amongst us and in the world. Paradoxically, God's power is most often revealed in the powerless, just as Christ's glory is revealed on the cross. We live in faith, expecting fresh possibilities for deliverance, healing, and wholeness, as God's work of redemption continues.

Some say that we have changed as a country, from one that wants to do good, to one that wants to feel good. There's no doubt that the surge of Christmas shopping mania reflects that ideal and a certain amount of escapism or denial. The kind of peace and security that society at large seems to think is found in material things, can only be found in God, and in Christ Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, Isaiah's prophetic words about God tearing open the heavens and making Himself known and present to humanity are described in Jesus' baptism. In fact, God's holy presence breaks into our lives on a daily basis, evident to those who are truly paying attention.

Advent is not a *passive* season of waiting and watching, but alertness to God's activity. We're also called to lament, repent of our sins, and open our hearts and lives in anticipation of God's goodness, steadfast love, and faithfulness. Our waiting for God, our deep and heartfelt desire for Christ's coming again in glory, is a painful longing, and a passionate patience. One of the consequences of our yearning for God in Christ is to swim against the tide, live in a different way that marks this Advent time of preparation, before our joyful celebration of the incarnation. In the words of Isaiah to God, "Now consider, we are all your people." God has not forgotten, but perhaps we need to remember all that is expected of us in bearing the identity of God's people. Are we willing to be clay in our Potter's hands? Are we willing to wait for real salvation, and to say "no" to cultural pressures? All so that we might graciously hope for, and accept, what is to be born within us, and among those who love the Lord? Let's give ourselves permission to experience the true meaning of Advent. In that way we might better reflect the true light of Christ's love into a world that just wants to feel good, that doesn't want to hear about sin, or about our desperate need for our Savior, Jesus Christ. If anyone asks us why we do what we do, we have Good News!

Amen.