

First Advent – Year B - November 30, 2008
Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37
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Have you ever wanted something so much that your heart just ached? Did it ever feel like the object of your desire had become a ghostly echo in your brain like a scratched old 45 jumping and skipping in a jukebox, repeating the same line over and over again? All the while, your heart picked up the beat, quivering with hopeful anticipation. I must have been all of 7 years old when I set my heart on a fancy looking doll crib with a gorgeous lace trimmed pillow and lining. There was also another crib, beautiful in a more simple style. It was plain-varnished wood with little red wooden beads threaded on the end rails. Either way, I would have to wait longingly until Christmas.

This morning's reading from the prophet Isaiah is as beautiful as many of the Psalms and like several of them is written as a lament for the sinfulness and faithlessness of humanity, and a burning desire for God. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down... to make your name known... so that the nations might tremble at your presence!" This is a battle cry of desperation for God's intervention. Indeed this passage is a fitting start to our new church year and the first Sunday of Advent. You will have noticed that the altar, pulpit and lectern are dressed in Advent blue, and that I'm wearing a blue stole. Blue or violet are the seasonal or liturgical colors. Blue denotes truth and eternity. Violet, also used during Lent signifies a reflective or penitential tone. Either color can be used for Advent because we have both aspects to contemplate during these four weeks before Christmas.

The first helps us to remember that we are about to welcome a new birth, a new life into the world, as we prepare to celebrate the feast of the Incarnation. Preparing for a new baby takes time and effort. No new parent would expect to bring a baby into their home without making space for a crib, making sure the window blind cords are squared away, and having baby clothes and diapers at the ready. Welcoming Christ into our hearts anew also takes time and effort, including spiritual reflection, and repentance. Focusing on Jesus, God incarnate, helps us to focus on embodied truth, and how who we are what we do makes a difference now and through eternity. It is an intentional and focused desire to start a fresh page in our lives. It is also akin to remembering and renewing our own Baptismal vows. In fact, today we will welcome a new member of Christ's Body, and celebrate a new journey of growth and grace in Christ Jesus. Baptism is the first step to new and everlasting life for all Christians. The first step mind, not the last.

The second aspect of self-examination and repentance is also magnificently illustrated in the reading from Isaiah. "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." We are walking, talking, jars of clay. The image of the potter and the clay is found in the prophetic books of both Isaiah and Jeremiah, and in Paul's letter to the Church in Rome. Knowing that we are dependent creatures makes a big difference in how we present ourselves to the world. Do we pray before making decisions to seek God's will above our own? Do we give thanks to God for all His gifts? When we hurt ourselves and others by our sinful behavior – note I say when, not if -- do we remember our Baptismal promise to repent and turn again to receive God's graceful forgiveness?

One of the reasons I am a Christian is because I know, I really **know** that I need a Savior. I need to be saved from myself, from all pettiness, willfulness and selfishness. One of the great gifts of this Advent season is patient self-reflection. Yet the real value of this important spiritual exercise is that after we have turned inwards to clear out the accumulated mess around our hearts and minds in preparation for Christ, we then swing wide the door and open that brightly lit and gleaming room to love and serve our neighbors as ourselves. Turning inward is good, but in discernment, God will always remind us to turn outward again and share our gifts in the way He intended for us as the work

of His hand.

Made in God's image, people have been imitating God's handiwork for hundreds and thousands of years by making useful vessels. The prophets have truly blessed us with the analogy of God the potter and people as the clay. Clay really is the dust of the earth, and reminds us of the story of humanity's creation from the Book of Genesis. It also brings to mind the words of our Ash Wednesday service, "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." By God's touch, you and I are molded and shaped into useful vessels of His grace. We call the products of our own industry anything from earthenware or stoneware, to china and porcelain. Just like the vast array of ceramics that we can make and purchase for ourselves, the diversity of humanity enriches and colors our lives in precious ways.

Everyone will experience hardship and challenges in life. Firing a pot makes it strong and functional, but it also makes it more vulnerable to being cracked or broken. How we handle challenges in faith, with God's help, often makes the difference in whether we are smashed to pieces, or merely chipped or nicked by adversity. Another way to look at this is that in pottery making, the designs and colors of the potter's hand do not show until the pot is fired. While some pigments go onto the raw clay in one color, the firing process frequently changes that color dramatically. This season of Advent is also a time of growth and change. A new color is about to be painted onto our hearts and into our lives, and we will still have to wait for the kiln to cool before we can see how God has worked a difference in us. Our new color, or shape or function is a gift from God, to serve His purpose. In an age of fast food, stores where shelves are bursting with an almost overwhelming array of choices to feed our need for instant gratification, waiting has become something of a lost art.

Having said that, I won't make you wait four weeks to tell you what happened on that long ago Christmas day. I had hoped and longed for the really pretty doll crib. When I scrambled out of bed at the crack of dawn on Christmas morning, a pile of gifts and toys had mysteriously appeared at the bottom of my bed. In an instant, my emotional barometer first soared in delight and then plummeted like the onset of a rapidly moving arctic storm. With the kind of disappointment that only a seven-year-old can feel my greedy eyes found the plain wooden crib with the little red beads, and my hopes were crushed. I have to admit it was several days before I could muster any enthusiasm for playing with that crib. And it was hard to feel grateful for the gift. However, by not having the fancy linens and pillow, in the end I spent more time playing with it, and creating all kinds of different ways to decorate it than I would have done if I had gotten the other crib. As we get older, we realize that these moments are not encapsulated into childhood, but pop up from time to time in life. It's a bit like playing a CD using the random song selector on your stereo. You can skip around from cool blues to vibrant jazz without knowing what is coming up next. We just need to remember that objects of desire can never fill that place in our hearts that belongs purely and solely to God.

On the other hand, seeking and yearning for God will feed us, nourish us, and satisfy the needs of our souls. Growing in faith and love of God can never disappoint in the way that stuff can and does. As the old Rolling Stones' song goes, "You can't always get what you want/ But if you try sometimes well you just might find you get what you need." That sounds a lot like an answer to prayer. As you and I begin our Advent journey together, may God help us to discern the difference between what we want, and what we need, to help us to look inward and outward opening our hearts to God and our neighbors, and finally to shine in gratitude with the brilliant colors that come only from the potter's hand.

Amen