

Homily for the 1st Sunday of Advent

November 28-29, 2020

Readings: Isaiah 63: 16B-17, 19B, 64: 2-7; 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9; Mark 13: 33-37

Preacher: Ruth Marchetti

Two thousand and twenty years ago a young couple waited for the birth of their child. Like all parents, they were hopeful and expectant, despite the desperation of their poverty or the cruelty of the ruling regime. Today, we are invited into the season of Advent, invited to seek out our own sense of hope in an era of trauma. We had become accustomed to entitlement, but the virus has awakened us to our vulnerability. We have much to learn from our scriptural ancestors.

We humans are a fickle lot. When things don't go the way we want, we cry out like Isaiah, "Where are you God? How could you let this happen to us? Show up among us and perform miracles so that we can trust in your goodness and our suffering will come to an end." Still, there is transformation even within Isaiah's desperate plea. The belief that the pain descends from a vengeful God as punishment for our wickedness becomes an affirmation of God's deep love for his creation. "Yet, O LORD, you are our father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands."

While Isaiah was preaching to a people in exile who had turned their backs on God, St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians is addressed to new converts full of fervor. Will they all stay firm to the end, or like the rest of us humans, will they falter and fall as they navigate the world's hardships and temptations? We all know the answer. Life brings times of joy and love, times of inattention and frantic searches for fulfillment and times of deep sorrow. God is always there, but our vision is sometimes clouded.

This pandemic has brought new understanding to the Gospel's warning to be watchful and alert. Indeed, we do not know when our time will come, where the virus might be lurking as we struggle to stay safe and healthy, who might be untouched and who laid low. We may have enough toilet paper to make it through the winter, but our spirits are stretched by isolation and insecurity. How can we stay faithful and attentive to our obligation to love and care for our neighbors? The needs are so great right now and we're easily distracted. It doesn't help that our view of the world is constantly challenged as the long-held

narrative of the superiority of dominant culture is challenged by those who have been excluded because God the potter formed them with darker skin or a sexuality different from our own. Where is God when the world seems strange and confusing to us?

As this Advent arrives, we understand waiting better than ever. Here we are like parents-to-be, nine months into the realization that life is never going to be the same. Hope in the form of a vaccine dangles before us, getting ever closer, yet, once again we fail to be faithful, to watch out for one another. We continue to gather and the virus spreads, inevitably bringing more suffering and death. “Why do you let us, God? It’s so hard. Why don’t you show up and just put things back the way they were?”

God never forsakes us. God comes. God comes as a poor infant born in a stable. God comes as the prophet calling God’s people back. God comes as Dr. Fauci, laying out what we need to do and promising salvation if we can only take care of each other for a few more months. God comes as the doctors and nurses risking their lives to care for the sick. God comes as the neighbor dropping off cookies or running errands for those at risk. God comes as the teacher, working day and night to compensate for interrupted lessons. God comes as frazzled parents, struggling to balance work and children without the supports of school and childcare. God comes as the jobless, the homeless, the sick, the dying inviting our compassion and assistance. God comes as our religious leaders—priests, ministers, rabbis, imams and lay leaders—as they struggle to provide spiritual care in a time of Zoom and streaming. God also comes as young black leaders refusing to accept the institutional violence and racism so intricately woven into our history. God comes as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people refusing to be someone’s joke, affirming their dignity and rights to live and love.

This time of Advent is a time like no other. How often have we wished for more time to simply be present to God’s presence, for an Advent and Christmas free of the harried shopping and frantic preparations that distract us from that presence? Here it is. It’s up to us. It’s not going to be a Hallmark Christmas, but it will probably be the Christmas you remember more than any other. How can we live an Advent of waiting that truly prepares us for a Christmas where we recognize that God is very much among us? Be watchful, be still.