

Why So Slow?
Menno Mennonite Church
November 29, 2020
Advent 1; Year B

Purpose: To hold with anticipation the work of God who moves even seemingly slowly

Message: We wait on God's acting in the world even as we wonder why, perhaps, things could be so slow.

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-8; Psalm 24

Synopsis: We are invited, always, to wait on the Lord. It is the central discipline of the life of faith. But that doesn't mean that we wait, always, patiently. Often we find ourselves wondering what could be possibly be taking so long for God to come and do what we so long for. To be sure, there is much that we would wish God to act on, right now especially.

The practice of advent reminds us that the reality of delay is not the same thing as a promise broken. As much as we might wish for something else of God's forceful response, we are invited into knowing full God's faithful action and work in our midst. God will act; we are invited to anticipate God's action even in the midst of waiting for more.

Isaiah 64:1–8 (NRSV)

¹O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

²as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—

to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations
might tremble at your presence!

³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down,
the mountains quaked at your presence.

⁴From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.

⁵You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.

But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.

We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities,
like the wind,
take us away.

⁷There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

⁸Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

Do you remember when an hour was a long time? It may well have dimmed in your memory through the years, but I recall when a whole hour was a big, big deal. It worked both ways as in “I have to wait a whole hour before supper” with ensuing crankiness for the duration, and “I got to stay up a whole hour past my bedtime”. Either way, the elation or desolation were fully and utterly real as I tried to comprehend how the hands of the clock could possibly move so slowly. Now that an hour is the basic unit of a working life and getting important things like sleep accomplished I am far more ready to see the clock moving far too far than I can ever conceive of being. Time changes as you perceive it. I think we have a bit of this time dilation in this strangest of years: it is both hard to believe that we stand again at the cusp of advent and the Christmas season, wondering where the time has gone even while we know that with all the conditions and controversies we may have wondered whether 2020 would ever finally, peacefully, come to an end. Maybe round 12 in this knock-down-drag-out fight of a year will finally go quietly.

I have to say that I approach advent with some trepidation this year. In some ways it couldn't be more appropriate: we wait upon the Lord in the way that we wait upon so much right now: the coming vaccines, a return to a broader sense of normalcy, on the changes that may come in the near future as things change and move as they will. Even as we have so much for which to be grateful, we long for the completion of this chapter to just have done with it. I think that is something that we can all agree on no matter what. At the same time it seems a bit cruel to wave the flag of waiting now when we are so conscious of the agenda that is well beyond our control. Perhaps it would be better to skip the churchly language of “yes, but not yet” and just go ahead and party the best we can while maintaining social distance. I wonder, do we have the patience to wait out one more process of revelation when we have been through so many already.

Yet, there is something particular about the discipline of waiting. Even when we might be left wondering if we are waiting for a reason. I think we can all be excused for wondering at least momentarily right now whether God has just gotten fed up with the lot of us and left us to our own devices. We might wonder deep down whether God is avoiding us and leaving us in time out until we are ready. Given the litany of just bad situations that confront us, who could blame us for thinking just in passing where the problem really lies. It is an utterly human response, and it puts us in good company with the people crying out to God to re connect them to

what they most longed for. During the period captured by the last chapters of Isaiah, the people of God seem to vacillate between hope and despair, certainty and dismay, assurance, and desperation. The Israelites have returned from living in Babylonian exile to be reunited with those who remained in the territory of Judah. Their return and reunion, however, do not signify restoration; they are not yet whole. Jerusalem is broken. This is the prophetic voice that we have today; this is the voice that wonders where God might have gotten off to while we are waiting for things to change.

In this passage, there is no getting around it: the prophet expects more out of God. There is a cry of wonderment of why things are not just, you know, fixed. We could even read some of what's here as a bit of a taunting of the most high here—If you could just do what you used to do back in the day, things would turn out right. Whereas prophecy generally takes the people of Israel to task for their failings (and the prophet does do that in confessional form) the point here seems to be to dish out a little prophetic license on the most high to spur something here. “Sure we sinned,” the prophet says, “And we know that you are angry, but if you could just get on with the restoration that was promised that would be nice.” The language here is that of a wish. He is looking for and seeing the hand of God, but wondering perhaps at the same time why things might take as long as they do. God's time and the prophets time, as is so often the case doesn't quite seem to be moving at the same rate. Often we want the God who works magic to make all things disappear that bother us. I know that I do. I can't tell you how many times I end up wishing for a magic wand and someone to come along and tell me that with the proper swish and flick of my wand I can achieve, can cause God to achieve that which we so long for to see in the here and now. Sometimes the fact that we don't have that power to fix that which we would for those who we love, those who deserve it, is more than we can really bear.

I need to spend a small moment with the anger here though too. There is much here made of God's burning anger at the people. It's the stuff—the warrior God stuff that we edit politely from our bibles because it does not fit our notion of the loving God. Indeed, much has been made of the God of judgement in the past, sometimes inspiring fear that was meant to give power as much as it was meant to lead to grace. It might be uncomfortable, but I think we need to allow for the righteous anger of a righteous God. Because I have little doubt that there is that in the world that causes God grief. Economic disparity and pitting one person against the next. The taking of lives and the losing of lives in tough situations. The ways that the way we treat

the others of God's creation with disrespect and disuse. The list goes on. Perhaps the best image here is not the God that fails to get angry—the ever present good natured chap. I think God does get angry at that which grieves God. Instead maybe we need to cleave more closely to the image of the God who active undertakes to hide sin from Godself, and forgets, for his own sake, the iniquities that lie between us—images that Isaiah himself suggests. Perhaps the God that hides from our sin rather than hides from we who sin is important.

I think we underuse this important image of this verse all the same: we remember Lord; you are the potter, we are the clay. We think of pottery as the fully fired-and-glazed stone wear that we use daily—our durable and familiar favorite mug for example. Its hard, immutable, and really only gets interesting when you catch the thing with your elbow and smash it to bits. Distanced as we are from our pot making experiences of grade school, we can forget what it is like. Clay is the addition of water to soil, allowing things to move and be moved. I know in art class after I had reframed what I said I was making into what the object in front of my actually resembled in my naming, I would be frustrated that it was time to clean up and set everything on the shelf for the whole week until it was time for art class to come around again. We would come back to these hard, lumpy gray masses that snapped if bent to hard or stressed to greatly. But you would slowly, always slowly, add back the water to the area that you wanted to work, or scratch up the point that you wanted to attach something to and things would spring back to life to become pliable and workable, even, sometimes, allowing that which could not be accomplished in the single sitting of creation I would have preferred. Only once things have been through the fire are we left with breaking as the only way to change what we have into what we want. Sometimes God is able to water that which has become dry and reshape that which is into that which it must be. Other times, we are broken—we know this. We have seen it. But even in our brokenness, possibility still exists.

Isaiah reminds us, Advent reminds us of that which we need to know: that God is our good potter. The conditions that seem so unalterably dried can meet water again and be changed. That which must be broken can be re-pieced and re-purposed to the newness of God. Advent invites us to wait again not to remind us of the long time passing of the clock that never moves, but rather that the living God comes and is waited on right here; right now. The chosen one renews us and our world, reshaping in the ways we sometimes strain to see. Dry parts are moistened, moved, reshaped and formed anew. That which is broken is not smashed with a

careless vengeance, but rather to make sure that the things that were before can, perhaps, be put to good use. There is mercy in that process. There is hope in the brokenness. There is change, always, in the hands of the master potter.

Isaiah remembers the best of God's actions, calling to mind the hope that is still alive even today: that God is God and we are not. Our clocks may be buzzing within us for change, but we do well to consider too whether the change we seek has been thoroughly tested through the filter of not being what we want, but what God wants in the world.

We wait for God. We wait for the world to move again. Advent reminds us that the times of God's movement are in God's hands, and that is Good. We wonder why it is all so slow. Then we remember that it is we who are being reworked in God's good time, and that is why it is so slow—because we are slow too.

May the good potter shape us each even as we anxiously await the world made new even amidst the world that seems to be coming apart at the seams. Amen.