First Sunday of Advent November 30, 2014

All Saints’ Church Year B

Isaiah 64: 1-9 Psalm 80: 1-7, 16-18

Corinthians 1: 3-9 Mark 13: 24-37

Let us pray: Dear Lord we thank you for the abundance of Life and Love.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent- a season of preparation.

In all of our readings, we hear communities in pain; there is much distress.

In Isaiah, the people want God to “tear open the heavens and come down, so the mountains would quake at his presence.” They think God has been too quiet. They want him to prove himself to their adversaries. To be done with it once and for all. No more need for doubt- just show yourself, O LORD. They want certainty, not faith.

The psalmist is lamenting, “You have fed us with the bread of tears; you have given us bowls of tears to drink.” How long dear LORD must we endure?

And in Mark, we are introduced to one of Jesus’ longest speeches, apocalyptic in nature about the lasts days. Jesus is distancing himself from the power of the Temple and its connection to the Davidic monarchy of power and rule. In fact, the temple will be destroyed. Your security will be gone, reminds Jesus. And the signs that you think you know, will not be the same. Not even Jesus’ knows the day, only God knows, so stay awake, be on guard, be on the lookout, be telescopic! Beware, keep alert.

Some of my questions: “What are the signs, and what are we looking for?” And,” how will we know when we find it?”

My first Advent as a priest, newly ordained, was at Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York City. We were putting on a beautiful pageant for Christmas Eve and everyone in the neighborhood, whether they were connected to the church or not, wanted their children in our pageant. So the first Sunday of Advent, after church services were over, we were mobbed. It was chaotic. Everyone seemed comfortable with it; they were used to the mob scene . I was overwhelmed. We were giving out parts and parents were fairly demanding, many wanting their children to have a “good part.” I was sighing (most likely in judgment).

I handed a little five year old girl, her prop, as the Star of David. Her mother scoffed a bit and asked what her child was going to do with ***that*** part?

“Mommy, I am going to shine. I am showing everyone the way to Jesus!”

I looked up at the mother, and she got it. I got it. “Oh my,” said the mother, of course, what an important part you have. Thank you for reminding me.” I stopped sighing and became thankful.

I share this encounter to give you a window into how to begin to welcome in Advent. We are being asked to keep alert to moments like these. The mother could have so easily dismissed her child’s delight to demand for something important. Instead, she saw the beauty. This beautiful and mysterious thing we call Incarnation. God was so present in this child’s enthusiasm.

Incarnation is not an easy word to define, though we use it all the time. I think we get to its meaning if we think of Incarnation like a wedding of divine nature and human nature, coming together to make meaning, to lift the veil in order to see beyond the way the world manifests itself to us. It’s mysterious, surprisingly so, and catches us off guard. And, we can easily miss the significance. To see, we sometimes have to be shaken up, awakened away from our usual pattern of being and thinking. Corinthians. Corinth is a city of power, p

This surprise and power of God’s incarnational grace is what Paul is talking about when he writes to the Corinthians. Corinth is a city of power, prestige, wealth and comforts. There is great pride in being from Corinth, with much status. And Paul, throughout his letter is reminding these citizens that they are not in charge, no matter how much they think they are. They are not the originators of the gifts they receive and enjoy. God is.

And yet, Paul is very tender with this contentious group that has caused hurt and division; they have even proven to be uncompromising. And yet Paul loves them and gives thanks for them because Paul has so much faith in God’s goodness and mercy. He tells them to be thankful, grateful, and they will be transformed, because God is working God’s grace within them, even despite their efforts to thwart God. They just need to pay attention to the REAL spiritual gifts.

We can be thankful for Paul’s tenderness because we can easily channel our own inner Corinthian, just as the mother and I had before her daughter woke us up from our slumber.

Advent is not just about getting ready for Jesus’ birth; Advent is inviting us to brace ourselves for the incarnational mystery that abounds.

The Gospel of Mark is clear about the birth story of Advent. There is no birth in the stable in Mark’s gospel, no three kings, no star of David shining over Bethlehem. Rather Mark opens his gospel with the new birth of the Ages: Jesus in our midst. And with Jesus’ power and authority, he will transform hurt, in all its ugly and evil forms, into hope. Always.

Incarnation: the wedding of the divine and the human within the dwelling of our own hearts. We are the objects of God’s love and tenderness. As Isaiah reveals, God is the Potter and we are the clay, continuously being shaped by God.

If you have ever worked in a potter’s studio, you can see all the efforts that go into making a pot- the initial shaping of the clay by hand, the trimming, the decorating, the adding of handles and rims, a first firing, a first glazing, and second following. So much “tending” to our creation, and it’s messy…. Lots of water, and dust, and bits of clay everywhere, demanding a constant cleaning up, rearranging, and a committed focus..

God’s rolling up his sleeves and going to work. We are being shaped by God’s hands: Incarnation.

We need to pay attention to see how God is tending to us.

A friend of mine told me this story. He was with a good friend of his, in his friend’s summer home in New Hampshire. It was August, steamy hot. And late at night, as they talked over a glass of wine, a thunder storm rolled in, and the lightening crashed around the house. My friend’s friend jumped up and raced up the stairs to tend to his four year old daughter. My friend followed close behind. And as they burst through the door, the little girls’ legs were sprawled out on the window sill with her arms stretched out against the window, face pressed up against the pane. “Honey, are you ok?”

“Oh Daddy, look- God is trying to take my picture!”

Incarnation. We can so easily miss it if we don’t pay attention.

God is the potter and we are the clay. God created us, each and every one of us with a unique soul, with an identity, with purpose, with love and with God’s great delight that God has chosen us, each one of us, to spend eternity with us.

God is waiting for us to see through the eyes of the divine, to believe in the power of the Incarnation, to look for it and to rejoice.

Be Alert. Keep Awake. It’s Advent.

(the Rev.) Jamie L. Hamilton