

Ottawa Mennonite Church
Sermon: Waiting for God
Text: Isaiah 64:1-9
November 30, 2008 – 1st Advent



HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Today we begin the season of Advent, and begin the new church year. This is a time for us to prepare for the coming of the Messiah; for Immanuel, God with Us, for Christ. It is a time of new hope, and new beginning as we anticipate the birth of the Christ child into this world and into our hearts. This is an exciting time of hope and joy for the future. God is coming, Christ is coming, and the Holy Spirit is coming. But, before we get there, before we can enter into this excitement, before we get caught up in all of the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, before we start to put up the decorations, before we put on the Christmas music CD's, we encounter the voice of Isaiah, who with an unmatched boldness cries out to an absent God, wails to a hidden God, and calls for our God to "tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at God's presence" (Isa. 64:1)

I often wish and hope for God to be more visibly present, clear as day standing beside me; I hope for God to be tangibly present, physically embracing me, I hope for God to be audibly present, and speaking in human words to me. Something in me wishes that God was always present. But in my experience, that's not the way it is with the living God. Oh yes, sometimes there is the blinding flash of light, the unmistakable voice from above, but in my experience God is not a God of theatrics, but instead of subtlety. God often is found in the shadows, rather than blinding light. God's presence is frequently found in the stillness rather than in the earthquake. God speaks most often through whispers, not shouts. And sometimes these whispers are very low whispers, the stillness is painfully silent and sometimes the shadows are very dark.

At the start of Advent we begin in darkness, with the face of God hidden from us. While it is often a comforting thought knowing that God is with us always, at the beginning of Advent, at the beginning of the Church's New Year, God is quiet, God feels absent, God is hidden from us.

As we prepare for the Christ child we easy to skip past the darkness and the absence and to instead fill it with stuff. In the absence of God, we fill the void with the bits and pieces of Christmas. Carefully placed garland; trees decorated with little lights, pieces of tinsel, and ornaments; we choose instead to follow a fat, smiling, white bearded old man, with rosy cheeks, and I don't mean Don, and follow him towards deals and discounts. Eggnogging our way to promised bliss. The Advent prophet meets us on our cheerful way up and inserts a cold, despairing word into our seeming optimism.

Isaiah 64:6-7

We 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.

There is no one who calls on God's 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.

Television and media tell us to buy, because we are looking for the "daddy daddy I love it" or the 'whoa ha-ha, it's even better than the one I asked for!" or even the "oh my God, oh my God, I love it, it's perfect, and it's pink too, I love pink"¹ gift, people on the other side of the world are dying from curable diseases, conflict is consuming nations, political unrest is

¹ Best Buy Holiday Ads, 2008

disorienting citizens, and an dismal economic outlook places each of our futures in the realm of uncertainty.

Amongst and amidst this disarray, a child is born. An infant will be born who is not what we expect; an infant will be born to a virgin mother, from a back corner town, in a dank, dark, dirty, and noisy stable, surrounded by farm animals. This infant will be a faint glimmer of light in an otherwise dark world, whose light will steadily grow, and will eventually become the light of the world.

C. S. Lewis wrote “The Christian faith is a thing of unspeakable joy, but it does not begin with joy, but rather in despair. And it is no good trying to reach the joy without first going through the despair.” The Christian faith is full of light, but it doesn’t begin with light, but rather in darkness. To see the light we must first sit in the darkness. For it is in the darkness that the light of Christ shines the brightest. God’s advent in Jesus Christ was in the dark of night. Isaiah’s lament speaks from the darkness and in darkness. It speaks in the absence of God, whose face remained hidden. And it speaks, in desperate hope, of a community that includes ‘all of us’ whose maker is God. Today we celebrate communion, in remembrance of Christ. In remembrance that in amongst the darkness in which we live today, that Christ is the light that breaks through this darkness. We celebrate communion in at the beginning of this season of anticipation. Because communion points to Christ, the one we anticipate the one we hope for, the one who will bring light to the darkness, and will not allow the darkness to remain.

Pray with me:

O God,

You are our God;

we are the clay,

and you are our potter;

we are all the work of your hand.

Do not be exceedingly angry,

O God,

and do not remember iniquity forever.

Now consider, we are all your people.

We watch and wait

For the warmth and light of your Christ's presence

As candlelight overcomes darkness,

So your Christ's light radiates within us

And warms the wintry seasons of our lives.

We live with hope

That the good news of Christ's coming

Will warm and brighten every heart

And the world will fall to its knees in Joy.

Amen.