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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
December 7, 2014
Mark 1:1-8
Isaiah 40:1-11

“Getting Ready for Christ(mas)”

Last Sunday morning, as we were eating breakfast, getting fueled up for our first full day at Disney World, I reminded everyone that it was the first Sunday of Advent. “There’s no room for Advent here!” Terry replied. If you’ve ever been to Disney, you might know what he means. When it’s sunny and 80 degrees, it’s hard to relate to Advent, a season that begins with light from only 1 candle. But it’s not only the weather or the lighting that makes Advent seem so remote, it’s everything else at Disney – a place where people tell you to “Have a magical day” and call your 7 year old daughter “Princess”; where there’s no homework for high schoolers, a parade seems to appear out of nowhere every couple of hours and everyone is singing and dancing and smiling in said parade, and, well, everything for just that moment – or 6 days as was the case for us – seems OK. Things like Ferguson, and strangleholds, and sexual assaults, not to mention all the problems in the rest of the world, all seem to disappear. And of course at Disney, they’ve even managed to make waiting in lines a happy experience – we found that out on our very first ride – a Star Wars ride where R2D2 and C3PO and storm troopers greeted us and entertained us on the spaceship before we got on the real ride. As Tommy said, “At 6 Flags all you do in line is stare at gum!” And with the new Fastpass system, you can avoid some lines altogether. So there’s not even any real waiting anymore . . .at least not the type of waiting that characterizes Advent.

Because there’s waiting . . .waiting in line, waiting in the doctor’s office to get your flu shot, waiting for the light to change . . .and then there’s waiting. Do you know what I mean? Some waiting is heavy. Waiting for a biopsy result, or waiting to see the ultrasound of your coming baby . . .that type of waiting seems to matter.

And that’s the type of waiting that characterizes Advent.

In both of our readings for today, people were waiting. They were waiting for God to come and make things right. But there was a problem: God, it seemed, was nowhere to be found.

This feeling is best summed up in the old Advent hymn:

O Come, O Come Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appears.

In Isaiah and in Mark the people are living in exile. In Isaiah, the people are literally in exile. Their hometown of Jerusalem had been destroyed; they'd witnessed looting, pillaging and killing. Those who did survive had been deported to Babylon, but it was an awful existence, the type of existence that made you wish you had been killed with everyone else. The people lived like that for 70 years. During that time, many of the original exiles died, while others were born. But all of them longed and waited for God to come and make things right.

So, too, the people reading Mark's gospel. Jerusalem was under siege; conditions were bad; people were divided. Some people wanted to force the infidels out of the region while others said submission to Rome was the path to progress. People were anxious for peace and security. Emperor Nero had died, four would-be emperors had been assassinated, and the general who did the pillaging had been crowned the new emperor. The people longed and waited for God to come and make things right.

Well, as we believe, God did come and make things right. God came in the form of Jesus Christ and made things right. But God didn't look at all like people imagined. God didn't look like a strong political figure who restored the Davidic Kingdom to its glory. God didn't look like a Roman emperor who ruled with power and might. Instead, this God who John proclaimed to his followers looked a lot like the one Isaiah proclaimed to the Israelites: a God who fed his flock and gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead them like a mother sheep.

But this God would also come and bring justice and peace and make things right in a way that no one ever expected. “Every valley shall be lifted up and mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.” That’s what Isaiah declared to them; and it’s what John the Baptist echoed all those years later. And it was the promise the people had been waiting for, for too long.

You know, prophets have a way of sensing God's dream, and holding it up to us. They have a way of casting a vision of a different day, a new day, a day God dreams of and so a day that must someday be. A day when the landscape will be rearranged by lifting up valleys and making paths in the desert and leveling the mountains and hills.

It almost sounds too crazy to be true.

But consider this: what if God’s dream isn’t crazy; and what if it’s not something we wait for like waiting for a ride at Disney World, which is to say something that happens without any effort on our part? What if, instead, we’re invited to be a part of God’s dream, and participate in that dream, hear and now? What if part of how God keeps God’s dream alive is through our efforts to heal, comfort, help and bring justice?

What if the beginning of the Good News of which Mark writes about is just that, just the beginning – and we’re invited to continue the story of the good news of Jesus Christ as God continues to write the gospel in and through our lives and communities?

What if the kind of waiting we do during Advent matters, because what we do matters? Sure, we can sit around and wait for Christmas, or wait for the world to get better without any effort on our part. **Or, we can get in the game, and spend our time, energy, wealth and lives making a difference.** Right here. Right now. Because it’s not just John who is called to cry out and prepare the way. It’s all of us. Right here. Right now, waiting actively, if you will, by making a difference in the lives of the people God has put all around us. God continues the story of the good news of Jesus in and through our words and actions, and each of us will have 101 opportunities this very week to continue that sacred story, to make it come alive, and to help keep God’s promises here and now.

This is the kind of active, involved, participatory waiting Advent invites, and this waiting matters.

Friends, no matter how you feel about what has transpired in our city over the last two weeks, none of us can deny that tragedies abound. A young man has been killed, parents have lost their child; a young police officer's family receives death threats; over 25 businesses burned and looted; a city torn, divided, and afraid. No one can deny that these are tragedies. And in the midst of tragedy we are called to act. How we act is a point of discernment: protesting, prayer, advocating, serving and protecting, using our positions of privilege to influence; but not acting is not an option. Standing by and waiting for someone else to contribute to God's dream, acting like nothing has happened or changed; that is simply not faithful.

Regardless of the exact sequence of events in Ferguson, regardless of where "fault" lies in the shooting, the grand jury decision, or the unrest that followed, we who follow Jesus are called to show the world a different possibility. We are called to embody and work for that prophetic vision, that divine dream that so easily dissipates in the face of cynicism and hopelessness.

If we are to prepare during Advent and celebrate at Christmas, surely it must be because we have good news for the citizens of our city, especially for those who have lost all hope. We may not be able to bring the Kingdom in all its fullness, but we can make it visible and tangible and help create hope. Otherwise our Christmas is little more than an exercise in nostalgia and manufactured cheerfulness like that at Disney World. And while Disney World is fun, and we had a great time, I think God wants all of us, *all of us*, no matter our skin color, socio economic status, education, vocation, gender, sexual orientation, or just plain old lot in life to have a magical day every day.

Don't you?

Amen.

Sources:

<http://james-sledge.blogspot.com/2014/11/ferguson-advent-and-gods-dream.html>

<http://www.davidlose.net/2014/12/advent-2-b/>