

Sermon: Advent 2

The Rev. Mike Wernick

November 15, 2015

Year B

Daniel 12:1-3

Psalms 16

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

When I want something... I want it now... I don't want to wait... and there are many things I can have when I want them... there are many things I can know... when I want to know them... I can look them up on my iPhone from almost anywhere I am... the new joke that Joel and I have... when I ask him a question or he asks me one is... *you have a smartphone*... and if I want to ask my mom or dad a question... I can call them from almost wherever I am... even in the car... instead of from a phone booth at a gas station... some of us have cable TV... and have movies on demand... we can see what we want when we want... and we have overnight delivery from Amazon... and soon... maybe... drones will deliver packages to our door so we don't have to wait too long...

It used to be... that people were used to waiting... Waiting to finding answers... or communicating with someone... could take weeks... or months... ships used to bring letters from Europe to America... the Pony Express delivered messages before we had the telegraph... or you might have to plan a trip to the city library to do some research on something... now we have instantaneous email and texting and Google...

But with the Advent of this technology... and a consumer driven society that promotes instant gratification... we don't want to wait... and we've forgotten how to just sit with something... a decision... a dilemma... an issue... and reflect on what it might mean... consider how we might be affected... or God forbid... what others might think or feel about it... we want fast answers so we can put things behind us and move on to the next event in our lives... the way politicians do... we've lost the intrinsic value of gratification delay... of working towards a goal... of looking ahead to our part in a process... and taking some personal or communal satisfaction in its eventual fruition...

But Advent is about waiting not just for the incarnation... but for the coming of God's kingdom... its fulfillment... its completion... its perfection... so Advent is about transition... and almost all of us... I dare say ALL of us... have gone through some kind of transition that creates an in-between time for us... John Shea wrote that it's like being a trapeze artist who's let go of one bar... but hasn't yet taken hold of the other one... you're not where you were... and not yet where you're going to be... he calls it mid-air living... the identity we had is gone and the identity we will have has not arrived... so depending on the particulars... and how we react to or process them... we may eat too little or too much... we may slough off work or become addicted to it... we may be silent when we ought to talk or talk when we ought to be silent... we may start things we don't finish or finish things we didn't start... and my favorite... we may get tired of our friends asking how we are or feel hurt when they don't...

But really... when we think about it... we live our entire lives in mid-air living... we talk... we act... we plan as though most things in our lives are changeless and immovable... and maybe that's a survival mechanism that keeps us from going crazy... but the truth is that our lives are in almost constant flux... we can hardly wait some things... like being able to drive... old enough to get married or move out of the house... get on with our education or careers... become grandparents... well maybe not all of us... buy that second home or retire...

And then there are the things that seem to throw a wrench in the works... like a medical diagnosis or some other kind of loss... but our lives are Advent lives... and sometimes... the waiting can feel like things are falling apart around us...

Katherine Grieb... who teaches New Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary wrote about the difference between what seems changeless... and what's not... The Jerusalem temple... newly reconstructed by Herod the Great at great expense... was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world... the project began about 20 years before the birth of Jesus... and according to Josephus... although the inner sanctuary

was completed quickly... in about 18 months... the Temple took many more years to complete.

It occupied a platform of more than 900 by 1500 feet... twice as large as the Roman Forum with its many temples... four times as large as the Athenian Acropolis with its Parthenon... about as long as four football fields... and about as wide as five...

The huge retaining walls that supported the temple were composed of great white stones as long as 40 feet... some of which still stand as part of the Western Wall... the front of the temple itself was a huge square... 150 feet on each side... much of it decorated with silver and gold... Josephus reports that Herod used so much gold to cover the outside walls of the temple that... in the bright sunlight... it nearly blinded anyone who looked at it... and the combination of the temple mount... the platform of huge retaining stones... and the large stones of the temple itself... raised the entire complex so high... that it could be seen from miles away by pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem to worship there...

She ends... the unnamed disciple... perhaps a peasant from rural Galilee... would have been impressed by what the Temple represented... the symbol of God's presence with Israel... and God's actual dwelling place at the center of the known world... but he would also have been impressed by the Temple itself... by its massive sense of stability... and by its stones which seemed changeless and immovable... both of these things were so weighty... so foundational... both literally and figuratively... that no one could imagine them going anywhere... *Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!*

And Jesus... who was sitting in both literal... and figurative opposition to the Temple... said *Not one stone will be left upon another*... whether what Jesus said and Mark wrote was prophecy or history... there was a literal outcome... the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 CE... but what I believe Jesus was really talking about... was that when

institutions don't reflect God's grace... when domination systems don't reflect God's love... when governments don't reflect God's law... no matter where they are or when they are... when they oppress people... when some people prosper at the expense of others... no matter how stable or grounded they may seem... they cannot stand in opposition to God's law... when God comes... the things we've thought of as foundational... have to go...

We live Advent lives... waiting for new life to come... but this new life comes with birth pangs... not because God desires it... but because we're the ones who have to dismantle... sometimes stone by stone... the systems we have created or supported... which are in opposition to God's law... when the Temple is gone... we live in an in-between time... not quite who we were... not yet who we will become... and during this time... it can be impossibly difficult to know what the mid-course corrections are... like the efforts to end systemic racism... and what evil is... like what happened in Paris on Friday evening... and when we realize that we live mid-air lives... and no longer have the limited certainty of what we were holding on to... it is possible to become more sensitive to all those around us who live mid-air lives too... and maybe instead of grabbing for the bar we think we want... the bar that serves only us... we can grab hold of the bar of God's justice that God continues to place in front of us...

In the East Coker section of T.S. Eliot's poem *The Four Quartets*... Eliot claims that the knowledge we derive from experience has only limited value... and he identifies humility as the only Wisdom possible for humans... he wrote: *I said to my soul... be still... and wait without hope... for hope would be hope for the wrong thing... wait without love... for love would be love of the wrong thing... there is yet faith... but the faith and love and hope... are all in the waiting...*

There are birth pangs in the world... and when we see the pain of conflict and violence in the world... and when we can identify with God's possibility of peace... it can be easy to wonder where God is... but we remember that in Deuteronomy God told the

Israelites... I set before you this day... life and death... blessings and curses... choose life... so that you and your descendants may live.

In our reading from Daniel... we're reassured that the Archangel will arise and slay the one who is aligned with division... darkness... and despair... in Hebrews we're reminded that the removal of sin comes through the grace of Christ... but we still have a part to play... God needs us as much as we need God...

Please pray with me: Holy God... you desire your children to have life... but too often we choose death... we are impatient and selfish... we mistake our limited experience for Wisdom... and our myopic sense of normal for what's normative... help us... so that we can Advent into the life that you have set before us... Amen.

Mike+