

ISAIAH 64:1-9

PSALM 80:1-7, 17-19

I CORINTHIANS 1:3-9

MARK 13:24-37

First Sunday of Advent, Hope

December 3, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

***Just Chill!***

**Waiting! Perhaps no other thing we humans do drives us as crazy, can make our blood boil, as waiting, a most passive non-active activity. Think about it for a moment. There is nothing worse than a waiting room, and that does not include the ones that unfortunately double as factories, all serving to incubate germs. We have all been there! Waiting in line! Waiting for somebody! Waiting for a call back! Waiting at the airport! Waiting for an Uber. Okay, just imagine doing that as an Eagle Riverite! Aren't you glad you do not! Or, like a child anxiously waiting for Santa Claus, for Christmas to come once more! Yes, watch out, don't pout, he and it is coming around again! Or how about waiting online or on the phone for Taylor Swift tickets! Oh, the tears of frustration! One writer calls the Swifty craze a new religion. And why not? Everything else seems to be religious in some way these days! Travis Kelce certainly seems to have found it! Yes, Taylor is rumored to be coming to Lambeau tonight! Waiting for Godot! Oh wait, that is the name of a play. And none of us has a clue who Godot is! I wonder how much of our lives in real time we spend waiting on something, for something? My hunch is that the amount is staggering. Yes, it would amount to a lot! Whoever coined the phrase "hurry up and wait" nailed it! And yet our Advent lections for today call us to wait, to wait for God, to wait for the Spirit, to literally wait for divine**

**intervention.** The ancient writers desperately asked in vain, “How long, O Lord?” (Psalm 13:1-2; Isaiah 6:11; Habakkuk 1:2; Revelation 6:10). And yet prophets proclaimed, promising the dawn of a new day, that indeed, God was doing a new thing (Isaiah 43:19). Despite the way we seek to avoid waiting like the plague, and even the way we read and interpret these texts, the ancient writers did not perceive waiting as we usually do, as a negative thing to be dreaded, but rather as a positive, hopeful, thing, anything but an exercise in futility. In fact, it offers biblical imagery that the writers understood to be an active as opposed to a passive exercise, layered with intentionality and proactivity, waiting conceived as a desired and necessary spiritual discipline, a devout devotional practice, always pregnant—great images enhancing this colorful time of year—revealing the mysterious, the unknown, laden with anticipation and excitement, and sadly still for others, a sense of ominous dread and fear. We are told to stay alert, to stay awake and to keep watch, perhaps like a shepherd over their flocks by night, to remain vigilant, for we do not know the hour or the day the Holy One, that holiness, might come upon us and overwhelm us with glad tidings of great joy. So, while we are waiting for a sermon to materialize right before our very eyes, we ponder what it means to wait and watch, to be alert, vigilant, perhaps to be on guard, remaining steadfast, all these metaphorical images interpreted in the biblical sense.

**Warning! As with many clergy, for whatever their various reasons, challenging texts I have certainly heard as a constant complaint, lamented as a major contributing factor, I too have struggled throughout my homiletical career to preach these Advent lections, dreading them to be perfectly candid, no matter whether they are from years A, B, or C. I am sure that a significant part of my dilemma is found in the fact that many of these texts seem so negative in their orientation because they are based in dire warnings that no longer speak to many contemporary Christians readers. Many of these texts**

are apocalyptic in nature, offering stark words that seem to threaten, words that have been so misinterpreted by the Church down through the ages, as countless individuals and congregations have trafficked in horrific endtime theologies and all the shameless marketing opportunities that come with it. And then of course there are the numerous John the Baptizer, John T. Baptist, texts that appear on the liturgical radar, John a wild man, uncouth and unkempt, very rough around the edges, who just happened to be a cousin of Jesus, appearing for all intents and purposes like an alterego to the humble rabbi. John brings with him his oldtime religion as a prophetic throwback, bringing the baggage of old that colors his dark preaching and prophecy in black and white, spouting all kinds of judgmental burning chaff and winnowing forks, checking to see who is naughty and not so nice, none of these images playing to our warm and fuzzy sensibilities during this festive holiday season. I offer the reminder every year that John T. is the Ebenezer Scrooge, the Grinch of bad tidings with no joy of the ancient world, all rolled into one. While Advent gives way to Christmas, it is as if they are in competition, their imagery fighting one another, to see which season reigns supreme. Advent, the cousin liturgical season of Lent, seems much more Lenten, a season dominated by darkness in both imagery and the reality we face this time of year in the northern hemisphere with these shortest of days. Our lack of light and Vitamin D often confronts many of us with waves of unexplainable and unresolved, and sometimes undiagnosed, depression. On the other hand, Christmas is all about light and life, new birth, and all creation celebrating God's Spirit manifest among all humanity.

But I have discovered another component in the challenges I face when confronting this season and its texts and that is its call to be still and know, to be intentionally discerning, reflective, and introspective, something that absolutely makes me nuts. Part of it I am sure is the constant noise in my right ear, a consuming sound called Tinitus, a

condition I have endured since the age of fifteen. Silence is very noisy for me! Sidebar! As you have learned by now I do not venture into the homiletical world of confessional preaching frequently, trying to keep my personal stories to the minimum, only engaging my journey when I believe it to be hyper-relevant, if there is such a thing. In fact I rarely turn aside to say these kinds of things. Today is the exception, not the rule! I have heard too many “tell-it-all” sermons unloading all kinds of revelations, that is, on the rare occasion I choose to listen to other clergy preach. But I am going to own this one because my hunch is that some, if not many of you, can relate. I very well may be a pastor, in fact, I am one, but I struggle mightily with all things devotional, specifically all things spiritual, all things associated with spirituality, introspective stuff. I tend to have a functional faith, probably way too pragmatic, too practical. I know I miss a lot! These amazing and fulfilling disciplines do not suit me well at all, despite affirming their value that others embrace and find so meaningful in their lives. Show me a labyrinth or ask me to engage in Lectio Divina and I will go in my shell, metaphorically running and hiding to get away from it, wishing it would end. **I will admit that when it comes to matters of belief and faith I am much too consumed, perhaps even obsessed, with the head over the heart, mind over what often matters, intellect over sensitivity, characteristics that are probably not lost on many or any of you. I have tried to fake it til I make it and that has not worked. And so I have reached a place of peace and acceptance with what has sometimes been a burden, yes, a struggle of spiritual proportions. I am not saying that I am not a spiritual person, whatever that means, but I am suggesting that I approach spirituality in a way that works for me. Many of the spiritual practices that feed some do not fulfill me in the least. Different strokes for different folks! Might as well own it! I will also admit, however, to being envious, yes, jealous, of those whose sacred pathways are immersed in what we call spirituality as if they possess a sixth sense about sensing the presumed presence of God, the Spirit closely hovering about them as they go about their daily tasks. They**

tend to enjoy carving out long periods of meditation, solitude, and other practices in which they find solace and meaning. My hope is that my candor, total honesty and transparency, is helpful to those who can relate and who also struggle, those like me whose belief and faith is much more dependent on a more immediate kind of practice or practicality, never implying that those with a more ethereal bent are not practical because their practices demand far more disciplined exercises than I can muster.

And speaking of discipline, that is why I need, and folks like me, need Advent, and yes, Lent, because these reflective seasons demand, require, force us to do just that, reflect. We all know that life is busy, busy with the heavy and the mundane, the significant and the trivial, but life is busy nonetheless. And so at the busiest, most hectic, frantic, time of the year for many, clergy everywhere resemble that remark. Advent forces us to slow down and pause, to take some inventory, to carve out whatever niche of time is necessary to consider the audacity of the ways that God comes into what is often a very polluted world, pollution being much more than an environmental crisis. I am reminded of the prophet Elijah on the other side of slaughtering the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, totally sending his adversarial tormenter Jezebel over the edge, making her mad and vengeful, and all at the same time, pushing her buttons way beyond her stretching and breaking point. Elijah feared for his life, was on the run, an unlikely fugitive since he supposedly had God on his side. First we find a pouting, sulking Elijah sitting under a tree somewhere outside of Beersheba waiting and wanting to die and then we find a haggard, exhausted, defender of his faith, hiding in fear in a cave at Horeb, the mount of God, cowering, and wondering just where was the God he had defended at all costs and was supposed to protect him from all harm. God seemed to be missing in action at the worst possible time, nowhere to be found in the crucible of this crisis. And then, in the stillness, Elijah hears the voice of the Holy One, saying, "What are you

doing here, Elijah?” Yes, why are you here! And Elijah whines to God, reminiscent of the petulance that would also be shown by Jonah, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts! For the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left. And they are seeking my life, to take it away.” Poor, poor, pitiful, pathetic, me! I added that last part for affect! Sometimes it takes loneliness, being alone, isolated, all by ourselves, to gain perspective, especially that of the religious variety. Me thinks Elijah’s awakening, alert to his surroundings, physical and emotional, mental and spiritual, was like a moment frozen in time, his waiting and watching, forcing Elijah to stop and think through the rush of events that had just overwhelmed his life as he fled the clutches of Ahab and Jezebel and all their minions. Moments of transcendence are indeed moments frozen in time as if time is suspended. These are the very rare Kairos moments that are so infrequent in our hectic lives, the very antithesis to Chronos time which is dictated by clocks and calendars, a timeliness that surely must be far beyond the concern of a God whose time is measured in thousands of years as being a nanosecond of our reality. Elijah was then instructed to go and stand on the mountain before the Lord, because the Holy was about to pass by. “Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind! And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake! And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire! And after the fire a sound of sheer silence!” I mean, this is a Stephen King, Stephen Spielberg, Cecile B. DeMille cinematographer biblical moment. “When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. A voice came to him asking the very same question originally raised with Elijah giving the same excuse of an answer. But now the voice told him to return to whence he had come, giving him further instructions for his impending arrival. In his time along with none other than his perception

of God, Elijah gained perspective including some much needed resolute.

I include this story from the Hebrew Bible because it speaks to our need to go into whatever constitute our own personal caves, our private space, the sacred intimate places that allow us to do the internal work that allows us even the remotest chance, the narrowest ability, to be still and know, to touch transcendence, the awe and mystery that wonder brings. Only we know the experiences, the places, that meet our unique needs. **Advent invites us to just chill, to enter those sacred spaces, the times and places that feed our souls and calm our spirits. And sometimes it takes a lot of work, a lot of trial and error, to find those illusive comfort zones.** So it was for Elijah and countless other biblical figures and so it is with us. **The prophet Isaiah spoke a sobering word, a word of acknowledgment declaring a profound reality, naming both the perceived absence of God and our human culpability, our participation, when we claim to lament the lack of God-presence in our lives and in our world. Isaiah begins the Hebrew Bible portion of our lections for today by lamenting the fact that God seems to be sorely missing in action, the writer assuming that God was purposefully, perhaps strangely, absent, the prophet almost begging for the Holy One to make an appearance, at least a cameo, as if playing a game of Hide and Seek. Oh, "if only you would tear open the heavens and come down!" Oh, the flattery, "From ancient times, no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God but you who acts on behalf of those who wait," there is that annoying and delightful word, "for God!" And then there is the self-flagellation, the guilt-ridden, judgment induced, self-destructive, and psyche damaging, kind of nonsensical stuff that human beings of every stripe have historically believed they were essential, that a petty and petulant, jealous God, needed to be appeased, flattered with all manner of flowery and complementary language, a demand we must invoke to somehow get God's attention, to gain God's mercy and**

**grace, peacefully loving presence, “But you were angry, and we sinned! Because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, 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 your name . . .” Do we really think a graciously loving God would expect or demand that from us, knowing full well that every person is created in the divine image, each one uniquely incarnational in their own individual way? No! And finally there is acceptance and acknowledgement that there are things beyond our control in our relationship with the Divine, and we simply need the wisdom to embrace that dynamic, “But now, Lord, you are our father,” yes, our divine parent, “We are the clay and you are our potter,” calling to mind some beautiful and stark imagery from the prophecy of Jeremiah, “All of us are the work of your hand. Do not rage so fiercely, Lord! Do not hold our sins against us forever!” And of course, that inane fear is all made up, all in our minds, revealing the worst, even most demonic, of our frightened imagination, for God is gracious, every time, all the time.**

**So, find ways at this holy time of year to skip all the hype implied in these apocalyptic writings we engage every Advent season, despite the fact that yes, they are part of the annual ritual, different texts, same song, second verse, just as bad as the first. So, do not in any way literalize the mythology behind scenarios that were ironically designed to bring comfort to the afflicted, assuaging their tormented souls, calming their uneasy spirits, in what was a tumultuously terrorizing and torturous day, but read in our contemporary post-scientific settings not helpful to us in any way whatsoever. During this holiday season, this most holy and sacred time, find ways to peel back the proverbial onion and see what is behind the curtain, and you will find God! Yes, God! These imaginative writers were simply trying to convey to their constituents, to say that God was indeed present, and yes, comes, to us in the most illusively, mysteriously, pervasively, subtle of ways, but that**



surely, truly, God comes! And that message still resonates, is as relevant today as it was when it was written. **Our goal, our task, sacramental at every level, perhaps even in every experience, every existential moment, no matter how seemingly insignificant it may be, including all our sensory awareness, is to find ways and means to trust, pathways leading to the hope, peace, joy, and love associated with our God. Stay alert, watchful, looking out for avenues revealing the presence of God once and for always fully revealed by and in Jesus, the man of Nazareth, Advent themes that, ironically, for all intents and purposes seem counter intuitive, seem to be missing, or at least subtly hidden, in these negatively infused texts. God comes to us in so many countless ways that we cannot count them, blessings we could never begin to name one by one, no one able to know at what time, the hour or the day, yes, each our and each day, God's timing never our own. So continue to be vigilant, to watch and to wait, to heed the warning that is a word of promise and not fear, to be alert to the subtlety of God-presence in ways that only you, that you alone, can perceive. Yes, only you will know! Just know that God comes, that the Holy Spirit comes, that Christ comes, yes, as a baby, as Spirit, and comes to us continually in myriad and sundry ways, all leading us on an adventuresome journey leading to spiritual growth and development. God is intimately revealed in ways that are unique to every human experience, that only work for each and every one of us, yes, including you and me. So, in the meantime, during this in-between time, this interim we call our lives, and as we enter this holiest of seasons with all the sacred and secular events that cloud it and frame it, once again—pretending as if for the first time if we can—just remember that all will be well! The message from Advent, the takeaway we so desperately need in our lives and in our world, is that God is near! Yes, God is here, closer than our next breath. God is in the midst. So relax! Stay calm! Stay bright! Just chill!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to wait and watch, to be alert and vigilant, always on the lookout, just in case! Amen and amen.**