

*Sermon for 3 Advent, Year A
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At the heart of all Christian devotion is a paradox, which is neatly pointed up by our collect today. “Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let thy bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us.” Our Advent liturgy actually guides us into eager expectancy. Not only do we look forward to Christmas and our celebration in remembrance of the first coming of the Lord, but we look eagerly for the ways in which God works among us today. And we also wait expectantly for the day when the Lord will return with power and great glory.

So when our forebears wrote this collect down 12 centuries ago or more, they were being obedient to God's word through James. “Establish [strengthen] your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.” He is coming soon. Get ready.

Of course, the paradox is that we have been encouraged with this prayer to do that for over a millennium. And when our ancient benefactors wrote this down, they were already the recipients of a seven hundred year old tradition of expecting the Lord to come soon. We have been expecting the Lord for two millennia, and sometimes we get tired.

Most of you have heard enough of my sermons to know that I am not suggesting we are wrong to follow this tradition. Of course, we know that the “soon” part of it is really from God's perspective, and he has a very different relationship to time than we do. We also know that the point here is to be constantly getting ready, and we all take a lot of cleaning up.

But it is difficult to live in the paradox of always expecting something you don't really expect. We have lives to plan for and desires of our own that are not evil in and of themselves. And we know that Jesus said it was not for us to know the times and the seasons. St. James tells us to be patient. And perhaps we find it just a little too easy to follow his advice. This is why we need to be reminded to pray, “Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us!”

On the other hand, St. James was speaking to people under persecution. They already eagerly desired the coming of the Lord, to deliver them from their trials. They were already praying our collect in some form, constantly. The reminder they needed was to be patient. To trust that God will fulfill his promises.

Actually, we all really need both. Insofar as we have experienced persecution, we can take to heart the example James holds up. The prophets spoke in the name of the Lord. And they are examples of suffering and patience, because for the most part they did not see the fulfillment of their prophecies. Today, we

can see the faithfulness of God in the fulfillment of what he said through them. But during their lifetimes, most were hated and vilified for speaking the truth. Yet they spoke it anyway, in obedience to God. And in faith that God's will for them was better than anything they could come up with on their own.

And there is the crux of the matter. What is God's final plan for us? Whether we want it and need to be patient, or whether we need to recapture the longing, we are pointed to the promises made clear in the prophets. Even the great prophet, John the Baptist, needed this. He was in prison and Jesus was not restoring the kingdom in the way he expected. So he sent his followers to ask his question: "Did I call this right? Are you really the one, Jesus? Or was I just sun-struck that day in the Jordan?"

And Jesus points him back to the plan. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." It is a direct reference to the words of Isaiah, including our passage this morning. Jesus is doing the work of the Messiah. That's the message to John. But it's more than that, too. There's plenty more in Isaiah that has not even yet been fulfilled. So Jesus is also saying, "Hold on, John. I know it's not the whole thing yet, but remember the plan. God is faithful. Remember his promises."

So here they are: Even though mankind, through his arrogance and rebellion, has turned the earth into a waste and a desert, that desert will still bloom. The waste that we have made will become like Lebanon, known for its great trees, and like Carmel and Sharon, known for their lush vegetation. It will experience the glorious presence of the Lord that made Moses' face glow. God will save us from the destruction that we have wrought. We who are blind to the truth will see clearly. We who are deaf to God's voice will hear him. The lame will not just walk, but will leap like a stag and dance. The dumb will not merely speak; they will sing in their joy. God's people who live in darkness and drought, parched and tormented by the desecration of sin in themselves and all around them, will suddenly look up. Rain will break over the desert with such fury that later it produces clear springs out of the dust. The rain will wash all the grime and desert sand off of us. And when the sun shines through the clouds, there will be a clear, straight road leading to the Holy City of God, a road just for God's people. And then all of the newly redeemed people will have a party on that road, as they move toward Zion. The new leapers will be dancing through the crowd, and the formerly dumb will be singing joyously to those who can suddenly hear, and everyone will be dazzled by the glorious beauty of what they can now see clearly. And the party will never end.

Poetic? Certainly. But do you really want prose? It's a vision of something that we cannot now possibly imagine in full. But a vision of reality nonetheless.

You can count on it. If that pleases you, if you actually desire to be in the presence of God on the way to the New Jerusalem, then just hold on. Strengthen your hearts. There is nothing that can keep you from being there if your will is set on submission to God.

On the other hand, let's ask ourselves the question: Do we really want it? Can we really say with St. Paul that being with him would be better? Or do we not want to see the vision? Would we rather just live lives planned by ourselves?

It has been said that the task of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I think that's about right. But the reason for it is this knowledge of the end that we are given in scripture. Everything I say here in this pulpit amounts to this: In the end, I want to meet you all on that highway. So if you're not taking this seriously, get off your butt. You're either on the highway or not, and I want to see you there at the end. But if you're just weary of the journey, "Be patient, fear not!" It's not your strength that matters, but only your will to hold on to Jesus. And nothing can tear you out of his hands.

"Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let thy bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."