

Patience. If watching for God, and waiting for God are themes of our Advent season, here comes the 3rd important ingredient of the season. Patience.

I thought it was interesting the way our scripture readings were arranged this week. First a vision is cast by Isaiah:

here is what it will look like when God comes among you, he proclaims.
In poetry and images designed to capture our deepest human longings,
Isaiah gives us an emotional and spiritual painting of what the human heart can feel like:
dry and thirsty like burning desert sands
shaky, like knees that you can't quite trust
like hands that are weak and wobbly,
that can't be trusted to hold a mug of coffee, or a baby, without risking disaster

Isaiah does a pretty good job of describing what it is like to be filled
with longing for something that we know is real,
but can't quite lay our hands on in the moment:
a well of peace springing up in the midst of despair.

Strength, and confidence in our ability to take the next necessary step.
One moment lame, the next leaping with joy.

Isaiah, in his beautiful poetry raises hope for a new day,
and the promise of God's constancy and mercy.

A new day will come, he announces, God is already working out the details.

Fast forward to Matthew's Gospel, and we find John the Baptist,
watching and waiting, and wondering, behind prison bars.

He knows of Jesus, he has been preparing the people to meet the Messiah.
John could use some good news right now, waiting in prison for his own end to come. Is Jesus the one to save the nations? Is the promise being fulfilled?

Maybe he even wonders if his own job is done. Maybe he can even rest a little easier as he awaits his death sentence to be carried out.

Has the Messiah has come, just like he hoped?

It's kind of an odd combination of images that Jesus uses in his answer to John.

Yes, the blind are being healed, the lame are walking. I am he you expected. And in his answer, Jesus addresses the people too: John was no spectacle for you to watch--no reed shaken by some powerful wind. John was no royal messenger with pretty robes and a soft life so you'd know he was from the royal palace. What John announces is the real deal:

God comes most powerfully not in pretty packages, but in the down and dirty of truth and hope right in the middle of the darkest of days. And if John, who is in prison, can know the reality of God, so can you.

God's presence isn't just for the greatest among you, it is, most importantly for the least among you states Jesus.

It is a powerful reminder of the nature of God:

God doesn't come with royal trappings to impress us with power.

The way God comes is to enter the mess of human life,
and bless it with grace, hope and mercy.

And when God comes, to our hearts, to our lives,
it feels like water that quenches and feeble knees strengthened.

So, today we have Isaiah who paints the picture of God's arrival
in hearts and lives,

we have the psalmist, whose words we use to underscore the promise
that what Isaiah is talking about is the real deal,

we have John the Baptist and Jesus, disclosing a promise that is being fulfilled:
God lives and has come to bless the people with new life.

And then there are the words from James, found in today's epistle.

James knows that God's coming is more like a seed that sprouts and grows,
than it is like reeds shaken by the wind,
or soft royal robes impressing us with their grandeur.

James knows that when the eyes of the blind are opened,
that when the lame leap with joy,

there will have been some pieces already put in place to make that happen.

Call it the seed that has been planted,

or the rain that has come to soften the soil so the seed can be planted,
but the reality is, that before God shows forth in tangible, visible ways,
God has been doing a fair amount of work behind the scenes.

Patience is what James teaches in his epistle.

Patience as we wait for the coming of God. Patience is what we celebrate this
third Sunday in Advent, with a pink candle to remind us to rejoice as we wait.

Most of you here today are probably here for the same reason I am here.

And that is because you have come to believe, or at least suspect,
that there is something more to life than what we can see, or touch,
or completely understand. And, standing on the shoulders of generations
of our Christian and Jewish brothers and sisters,
we also believe that this mystery, this spiritual reality we call God,
isn't just out there, somewhere, doing its own thing,
but that this mystery somehow involves us.

That is what Judaism and Christianity teach:

not a distant, neutral God, some force that is distant
and uninvolved with human life or history.

We make the claim that the mystery that is God is also an intimate partner to
humans. To individual humans, and to humanity as a whole.

We claim that divine life and human life are somehow intertwined. That,
like that great painting shows on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel,
God reaches out to touch us.

Most of us have come because we want that spiritual reality,
that great mystery we call God, to somehow be a part of our lives.
In fact, maybe St. Augustine said it best: we are made for you, God,
and our hearts are restless until we find a home in you.

Patience is the watchword for this 3rd Sunday of Advent,
because patience is an attribute of the spiritual life,
of the life of one who seeks God.

But this is no idle patience we practice, but a patience that is steadfast,
trusting and hopeful. We come to church even when we feel empty,

we come to God in prayer even when we lack words.

We trust that there is something, or someone, out there beyond us,
that rejoices in our very existence, in our very life,
and will not leave us forlorn forever.

We come to church even when we are discouraged:
we seek the community of other believers
because just them being here reminds us that we aren't crazy to be wanting God.
If other people are here, maybe they are wanting God too.

We take a walk in the woods to remember peace.

We bring warm socks and hats for visiting seamen, to remember mercy.

We practice the patience of showing up for God, over, and over again,
so that we are there when God shows up for us.

And when we look for God's appearing, we remember that

we aren't looking for fine robes, or a reed shaken by the wind.

God will come to us in the smallest of ways--a gleam of joy in someone's eyes,
the touch of a hand on the arm, a heart warmed by beauty,
a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, humble
and full of God's promise to walk with us,
and turn our desert places into streams of living waters.

And so we wait for God with patience, this 3rd Sunday of Advent,
preparing in our lives and in our hearts,
a place for God to dwell.