

## God Who Meets Us

Isaiah 64:1-9

*You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.*

Mark 13:28-37 *“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”*

The Advent season is filled with wonderful and rich images for the spiritual life, for living as people of faith. The word “advent” means “coming” or “arrival.” It refers to Jesus’ birth and life, that in him God draws near to us, revealing our true humanity. On this first Sunday of Advent we light the candle of hope on the Advent wreath. This is the ground of our hope—even in the darkest moments of life, even when we as God’s children act as badly as in Mumbai this week, God draws near to us, never giving up on us, always ready to empower us to be who we are created to be.

We forget who we really are. We forget our connectedness to God. We become filled with fear, or discouragement, or hopelessness. A painful longing rises up within us, like the cry that opens our reading from Isaiah 64: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence.” Don’t we all feel that way at times? Don’t we also wish God would just do something, show us a sign, make the way plain and clear? It would make the spiritual life so much easier if God would just give us visible, tangible signs, if God would just do something about the terrible things in the world, the overwhelming tasks that we have before us. Even the most theologically sophisticated among us must admit to having had such thoughts and questions at times.

There are times when, as individuals or a human family, we experience such distress, such pain, such longing that we lose hope that anything will change. Then we settle in, hunker down, and simply adjust to what we see as just the way things are. God then becomes that experience of inner peace that we try to maintain in the midst of our despair and hopelessness. I recall a description of the spirituality of Advent as being locked up in a dark room, like a prison cell, with no way to open the door except from the outside. Someone has to come and lift the latch. That is our experience sometimes. And that is the Advent message in scripture, that God comes to us, to open the door, to make a way out of what seems to be no way.

However, the Advent message also tells us that there IS something we can do. It is not just about God’s coming to us, but of our moving toward God. There is an old Jewish story about Israel’s escape from Egypt. When the people came to the Red Sea, the story goes, God did not part the waters until the first Israelite jumped in! When I read our passage from Isaiah 64 this week, these words stood out to me: “From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, **who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.**” God works for those who wait for God. God meets those who do right, who remember God’s ways. The spiritual life, the life that is mindful of our relationship with God and what that means for our living, is about waiting, and it is about doing right and remembering God’s ways.

In Advent we hear a lot about waiting. We don’t like waiting. We think it means doing nothing, just sitting around. We want to get on with it. But in scripture waiting is at the heart of the spiritual life, life in relationship with God. This kind of waiting is active, not passive. It is about being alert and watchful, not asleep and inattentive. That is what the inward journey is about—paying attention to our own lives inside and out. It is taking the time each day to be aware of what is going on inside us and around us, what is happening within us and in our relationships to other people and the world. When we finally decide that we will try this thing of being quiet and attentive, practicing silence and inner listening, we make a great discovery. We begin to realize that we have been asleep. We thought we were awake. We thought we were alive. But instead we were just plunging through our moments and days, going from one thing to another, not aware of anything we were doing. We ate our meals without tasting them. We talked with other people without listening to them, without

really being WITH them. We thought we were doing good things for others when we were really acting out of our own guilt or desire to prove ourselves.

There are many more ways that we thought we were awake, but we were really asleep. This is true for us as individuals and as a human family. The people who stormed into Mumbai and started shooting their brothers and sisters represent the extremity of being asleep—asleep in doctrines and violence and believing we can force our way upon others. It is the same thing we have been doing in Afghanistan and Iraq. No one has kept an accounting of the thousands of men, women and children we have killed there because we were asleep in our rightness and our military might. The “Black Friday” mob that stormed into that Wal-Mart in New York, trampling a young store clerk to death—that, too, is being so asleep that we are lost in a nightmare of consumerism, of buying, and beating someone else to a bargain. If our responses to such things are only anger and the desire for revenge or punishment, we, too, are still asleep. These terrible things must cause us to see more clearly our predicament, to find ways to wake up others and ourselves.

The reading from Mark’s gospel, like the message of Isaiah, is a wake-up call. Jesus first talks about the ultimate things, when the Son of Man will come at the end of time and God’s kingdom will be fully established. He talks about perceiving the signs of these things. Then all of a sudden Jesus turns on a dime and says the opposite: there is no way anyone, even the Son of Man, knows when this is going to take place. Forget it! Quit trying to predict. Quit being preoccupied with stuff you cannot know. Most of all, quit thinking that you can or should bring in God’s reign by force. Let God take care of the big picture, the big future. Come back to the present moment. Wake up! Be alert! Don’t sleep through your lives. Wake up!

That is, to my mind, the best definition of what we mean by the spiritual life. It is waking up, becoming alert and attentive to our lives. It is about being aware of what is going on in us and around us so that we really see things and understand things. We find as we do this spiritual work of waking up that God becomes more real to us, seems nearer to us. God no longer is some idea or religious doctrine in our heads, but a reality within and behind, as it were, everything and everyone in our lives.

All of this is part of why we lift up the importance of making a commitment to a daily practice of the inward journey. This is an appointment we make with ourselves and God each day, and keep it faithfully. We sit quietly, let our thoughts and feelings settle. We listen inwardly to our own lives and to God. We grow in our capacity to look deeply into and gain compassionate understanding of ourselves, especially the parts of us we fear or hate. We read scripture and other writings that nourish awareness of life, of God. We pray for others and ourselves, for the particular needs we have, but also never forgetting to be grateful. When we begin this kind of daily practice, keeping faithful with it over time, we discover the joy of making that journey toward God who has drawn near to us. We grow in our understanding of what it means to wake up.

The other way we move toward God is what Isaiah is getting at when he writes: “You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.” When we “gladly do right,” God meets us, God draws near. This is not about doing good things so that we earn God’s love. It is about living in right ways so that we know God’s presence, God’s nearness. This is right practice or right living. It is what we call the outward journey, the ways our lives express outwardly our inward relationship with God. There is a saying around mental health circles about the way we habitually do the same things over and over, and expect different results. For Isaiah and indeed the whole of scripture, including Jesus, there is the wisdom that when we feel distant from God, it is usually because we have drifted into living in ways contrary to the way God made us to live. So how do we get back? How do we begin to experience the nearness of God after having felt like we were in exile? We LIVE our way back. We change the way we live, the decisions we make, the actions we engage in.

What am I doing now that keeps me feeling disconnected from God and a fuller, richer, more loving way of living? Am I harboring resentments, anger, hurt so that, far from feeling in touch with God and God’s gracious love, I am stuck in the past nursing all these grudges? Do I feel alienated from God because I feel alienated from people so much of the time, always criticizing and judging others, putting up walls between myself and them? And is this not really rooted in the way I am constantly judging myself, filled with self-hatred which I then project

onto other people? Is the way I am living causing harm to myself, to others, to the earth? If so, then no wonder I feel distant from God, that God is not really real for me.

The answer of scripture is that we ACT our way back into awareness of God's nearness. That's the meaning of the word "repentance." It means changing our minds, turning around and going in another direction. We remember God's ways and we examine our lives to see how we can begin doing things differently, in more healthful, loving, compassionate directions. There is a verse in Psalm 25 that puts this beautifully: "All the paths of God are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep God's covenant and God's decrees." There it is again, this sense that when we move toward God we meet God who is moving toward us. The life of faith is this "moving toward" kind of partnership between us and God. It is like a dance, really. The outward journey is about finding the right steps, the ones that have to do with who we really are, who God made us to be, the gifts God has given us to use, the callings God has implanted in our hearts. These are the steps that lead to God.

Vince Sawyer shared something with me this week that a friend shared with him. His friend is very active in AA. The 12-step program, said his friend, is designed to lead us to a relationship with God, the God of our understanding. That was a simply-put way of saying the same thing. There are steps we can take, things we can do, that lead us toward God who is already coming near to us. We can grow in our capacity to wait, to be alert, to become awake. And we can do the things that are of God and God's ways. And as we work with that, God meets us.