

November 27, 2011 / First Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

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 brings rich images for the spiritual life, for living as people and a community 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 personal moments of life, even when we as God’s children act as badly as we are doing these days here in this country and throughout the world, God is always drawing near, never giving up on us, always ready to empower us to be who we are created to be. The problem is not God’s presence or reality, but our lack of awareness. That points to our need for spiritual work, our inward journey. Advent is a season for waking up.

We forget who we really are. We forget our connectedness to God. We spiral down into fear, or discouragement, or hopelessness. We get drawn into the anxiousness or hostility or violence that surrounds us, and we lose touch with our true selves. A painful longing rises up within us, like the opening cry of 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? As theologically sophisticated as we may be, aren’t there times when we wish God would just swoop in, like Superman, and fix things?

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. 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 the ways of God.

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. There it is: the inward journey and the outward journey. Both lead us to awareness of God.

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. In scripture, however, 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. Instead, we were just plunging through our moments and days, going from one thing to another, not really aware of or present in 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 are so full of judgments we make about people, we never really SEE people. We thought we were doing good things for others when we were really acting out of guilt or compulsion or the need to prove ourselves. Instead of being alive in each moment, we have been asleep in the past--our guilt, regret, or hurts we continue to nurse. Or we have

been daydreaming, living in some future we imagine will be better than the present circumstances of our lives. This is all being asleep, not really living, not being alive to ourselves, others, the world around us, and to God.

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!

For the early Christian community, these words were a call to turn away from preoccupation with the so-called second coming of Christ to what it means to live as Jesus' community in the world. For us today, these words offer a good 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. It is then that we begin to give attention to life, and I think that is also a good definition of love—giving attention, paying attention, really seeing, listening, being with. We find as we do this spiritual work of waking up that God becomes more real to us, seems nearer to us. God becomes less an idea or religious doctrine in our heads, and more that Nameless Reality within everything and everyone, giving life.

All of this is 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 have this kind of daily practice, keeping it as faithfully as we can, even when it is hard, 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.

We also move toward God who moves toward us as we “gladly do right” and “remember God in God's ways.” 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. 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. We keep doing things that harm others, the earth, and ourselves, and yet we wonder why we do not experience the reality of God.

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 my lack of awareness of God or the presence of God in life around me possibly related to my NOT giving time each day to the inward journey? If we find ourselves thinking or talking about the inward journey and not really DOING it, that is the sign we need to go back and sit and quiet ourselves, and start again.

The counsel 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 inward journey is about the kind of active waiting that opens us to God, in which we wake up to the reality of our lives in relation to God. The outward journey is about taking 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 we can take, the things we can do, that lead us toward God who is already and always drawing 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. This is the spirituality of Advent.