

November 30, 2014 / First Sunday in Advent / David L. Edwards

God Who Meets Us

Isaiah 64:1-9 *You meet those who find joy in doing what is right,
who remember how you want them to live.*

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

The Advent season is rich in things for us to contemplate and work with 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 is near us, revealing our true humanity. On this first Sunday of Advent we light the candle of hope on the Advent wreath. The ground of our hope is that even in the darkest personal moments of life, or when we as a human family 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, our forgetfulness. Advent is a season for waking up.

We live in a culture of forgetfulness. 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 no longer know who we are. 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.* As theologically sophisticated as we may be, aren’t there times when we wish there were a God “up there” who would swoop down, like Superman, and fix things?

Advent speaks of God’s presence, God’s nearness. It also tells us that there is something we can do. We can open up or wake up to that presence. When I read our passage from Isaiah 64, these words stood out to me (I paraphrased them a bit, based on several translations): *No one has ever seen or heard of such a God, who empowers (works for) those who wait for You. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.* God empowers or works for and with those who wait for God. God meets those who do right, not with sour and glum faces, but with joy. And God meets those who remember the ways of God. These images speak of harmoniz-ing our lives with 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 remembering and living in God's ways. There it is: the inward journey and the outward journey.

In Advent we hear a lot about waiting. We don't like waiting. We think it means doing nothing, just sitting around. In scripture, however, waiting is at the heart of the life of faith. This kind of waiting is active, not passive. It is 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 with other people and the world. When we work with 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 racing 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 were full of judgments about people, never really SEEING them. In the words of Henry David Thoreau, we were marching to a hundred other drumbeats than our own, not discovering and living out of the uniqueness of our own lives and gifts and callings. We talked to other people without listening to them. One of the things that is coming out of the Ferguson MO events, and those at the University of Virginia regarding sexual violence against women, is the imperative that we start listening—listening to the victims instead of leaping to justify institutions or attitudes and values that sustain the violence. Listening to women. Listening to black communities dominated by white police departments and majority white political institutions. Advent is about waking up, paying attention—to ourselves, others, and the world around us as God's good but violated creation.

The reading from Mark's gospel, like the message of Isaiah, is a wake-up call. Jesus first talks about 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: no one, not even the Son of Man, knows when this will take place. Forget it! Quit trying to predict. Quit being preoccupied with stuff you cannot know. Come back to the present moment. Wake up! Be alert! Don't sleep through your lives!

For the early Christian community, these words were a call to turn away from preoccupation with the so-called second coming of Christ—which did not happen the way they expected--to what it meant 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 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, even when we don't think we have the time, we discover the joy of making that journey toward God who has drawn near to us.

We also move toward God who moves toward us as we *find joy in doing what is right* and *remembering how God wants us to live*. This is not about doing good things to earn God's love, or to be "good people". It is about knowing God's nearness, God's presence as we live in good and true ways. 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, 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 wonder why we do not experience the reality of God.

So how do we get back to our true selves? We LIVE our way back. We change the ways 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, 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 distant 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, projecting my discontent with myself onto other people? Is my lack of awareness of God possibly related to my NOT giving time each day to the inward journey? If we find ourselves thinking or talking about the inward journey instead of really DOING it, then we go back and sit and quiet ourselves, and start again. Last week Kaye and I visited an

exhibit of the “cut-outs” of Henri Matisse at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. I remembered an interview with Matisse I read many years ago. *What do you think of artists who talk about their work?* asks the interviewer. Matisse made a scissors motion toward his tongue. *They should have their tongues cut out!* In other words, do it, don't talk about it. Sometimes I feel this is good advice for us as Christians. Less talk. More silence and listening. More doing of the things we talk about.

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 not just our minds, but our ways of living. 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. We do this by small steps, mostly. A different word. A different thought. A difference action. A different way of looking at people, or money, or possessions, or ourselves, or the world.

The life of faith is this “moving toward” kind of partnership between us and God. It is like a dance, really. In the past thirty years or so, I have been very interested in understanding and learning from other spiritual traditions than our own. I have come to appreciate the distinctive emphasis in my own tradition (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) on a balance between the inward and the outward, prayer and service, loving God and loving others as ourselves. I say distinctive, not unique or better. This is the spirituality embodied in Jesus' life and teachings. The inward journey is the active waiting that opens us to God, our waking up to the reality of our lives in relation to God. The outward journey is 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. The spiritual life is a dance, from the inward to the outward, from the outward back to the inward. When we get stuck in ourselves, too much fruitless self-examination, more self-preoccupied than self-understanding, then it is time to go outward, to do something for others, to “get out of ourselves.” When we become consumed with too much doing, becoming exhausted, frustrated, or aggressive, then it is time to go back to the inward. If we work with these things over time, we will come to know ourselves pretty well, and what we need when—to go inward or outward.

These are the steps that we can take--or dance--that lead us toward God who is already and always drawing near to us. We grow in our capacity to wait, to be alert, to become awake. We do the things that are of God and God's ways. And as we work with that, God meets us, is with us, empowers us. This is the spirituality of Advent.