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Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church
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November 30, 2014
Newark, Delaware

Isaiah 64:1-9

Mark 13:24-37

“Yearning”

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT! A time to experience the most exquisite waiting—impatiently waiting, yet waiting in hope. Something big is about to happen, and when you look around, it seems like it is already happening. I mean, lights are twinkling and trees are sparkling and stores are hectic. (Perhaps not as crazy as last year, but hectic, nevertheless) But we’re waiting. And it isn’t here yet. It will be, but not yet.

YES, already Christmas seems to surround us.

And in the middle of all this pre-Christmas excitement, the church puts on the brakes, slows down, and becomes subdued, pensive. **It’s Advent.** A special quiet time to ponder, to watch, to be alert for something new to happen.

In fact, waiting is an important Biblical theme. And it’s more than passive waiting. It’s not like putting your mind, your heart and feet into neutral. Rather, it’s yearning, and longing.

”O God, would that you tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence, to make your name known to your adversaries.”

That prayer is twenty-five hundred years old and it comes around in the Lectionary every three years. And when I hear it, I recall our Wilmington neighbor across the street on Van Buren Street. He’s a retired elementary school teacher. Every year he and his partner had a grand neighborhood Christmas party, complete with a delicious dinner and then everyone gathered by the fireplace in their living room and spread over into the dining room and the central hallway ... some squeezed into spaces on the floor while Don read stories, awesome Christmas stories. With lovely illustrations. Most at first blush appear to be stories for children ... But really, the stories are for all of us. Each year he included a

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reading from a little volume: Children's Letters to God.
Here are some excerpts:

Dear God,
Are you really invisible
or is that just a trick?
Lucy

Dear God,
Thank you for baby brother,
but what I prayed for was a puppy.
Joyce

Dear God,
Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much
if they had their own room. It works with my brother.
Larry

Dear God,
Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones,
why don't you just keep the ones you got now?
Jane

And a favorite ... an Advent prayer:

Dear God,
Are you real? Some people don't believe it.
If you are real, you'd better do something quick.
Love,
Harriet Anne

Harriet Anne sounds a lot like the prophet Isaiah:

**“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down to
make your name known to your adversaries.”**

Here's the context of the text: The armies of Babylon have
crushed Israel and carried off Israel's leadership, politicians,
businessmen, clergy, back to Babylon to live in exile. Several
generations pass in exile, and then amazing things happen.

The Persian Empire defeats the Babylonians, and one of the first
things the Persian leader, Cyrus, does is send the Jewish exiles

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home, back across the desert to Jerusalem. They have been waiting for this moment for seventy years, for three generations. They have been singing songs about Jerusalem, reciting poems, telling stories to their children born in Babylon, stories about their beautiful city, the strong walls, the gleaming buildings, the temple built by King Solomon himself.

But when they arrive home after the long trek across the desert, what they see is desolation. The city walls have been torn down, the beautiful buildings burned to the ground, and the temple—the heart and soul of the people—is in ruins.

They should have known, but they didn't. The early ones who told the stories and who had lived through the trauma of defeat and exile had all died.

So the devastation shocked those returning. It must have been something like those heartbreaking pictures of families returning to their homes after a fire or a flood, sifting through the ashes or muck for any scrap of family belongings, furniture, scrapbooks, photographs—any reminder of who they were and who they are.

It is at that crucial moment that one of their poets prays with them:

“O God, would that you tear open the heavens and come down to make your name known to your adversaries.”

Or, as Harriet Anne would pray, “God, Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are real, you better do something quick.”

It is among the oldest prayers in human history. It is a lament prayed at times of tragedy, occasions of undeserved, innocent suffering. Prayed at times of loss. It is a prayer I suspect you and I pray a lot. “If you are a good and gracious and merciful God, why did this happen? Why does evil stuff still haunt women, children and men in Nigeria and Syria? Why do bombs and rifle-fire continue to kill children and innocents in Afghanistan? Why are families and whole communities ravaged by Ebola? **Why don't you do something—tear open the heavens and come down?”**

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Terry Anderson, one of the American hostages held by Iran for seven years, back in the mid 1980's wrote in his journal, "I reach so hard to touch God, concentrating, waiting for something, some acknowledgment from God that I exist, that God is listening. . . . Help me. You say you love me, so help me."

Who hasn't prayed that prayer, cried that question? During these weeks of tumult in Ferguson, a community pastor lamented, "They say everything happens for a reason. I sure wish I understood why this had to happen."

We yearn for answers. We yearn for certainty. We yearn to know God is there. That God knows we are here. We yearn to know, for certain, that God cares.

And it's not just in the middle of tragedy and grief. It is an everyday yearning that seems to be deep within almost every one of us. It's part of who we are.

I recall a person who confessed to me, "I am happy and yet there is something deeply missing. And it is a deep longing that can't be satisfied. I look in the mirror and ask, 'Is this all?' And then I think, 'I have everything. I have a loving husband, a house, children, a career. Why am I yearning for something more? And I don't even know what I am yearning for"

She was, of course, yearning for the same thing Isaiah, and those exiles, Terry Anderson, the people of Ferguson, and Harriet Anne, and you and I yearn for: **for God**. Yearning the same ancient longing for God to do something, to tear open the heavens and come down.

But wait. For Isaiah's prayer takes a surprising turn, a change in tone, and offers a new idea/an enriched understanding about God and how God comes to us and works in the world that God created.

And how God relates to human beings, to you and me.

Did you hear it? After pleading with God to do something, after whining that God is hiding, after almost accusing God for not coming down to make things right, the prayer makes a startling affirmation, offers a new idea, a confession of faith:

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**Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are the potter:
we are the work of your hand.**

That's an absolutely new and unique idea of God and how God works: **Father, Potter**. Not an overwhelming force that violently tears open heavens and comes down, and intervenes forcefully in human affairs to bring down cruel leaders and establishes justice.

Father ...Potter - Who doesn't wish for a God like that? Not God of omnipotent power in the universe, but God as, of all things, a parent, an artist. A mother. A father. A potter.

I know a little bit about being a parent, and I know that patient, consistent love works a lot better than coercion. I have seen, over and over, how my inclination to force behavior to change doesn't work and how steady, gentle persuasion accomplishes much more.

And I know enough about parenting to know that there are limits. That you cannot, finally, protect your child from all risk, all danger, all harm. But a crucial act of love is not to hold tightly and coerce, but to let go and promise yourself that you will be there in love, come what may.

I am certainly not an artist, but I have watched potters at work enough to know that it is not about force and coercion but gentle persuasion.

As the shapeless lump of clay whirls on the wheel, the potter firmly – then gently touches it with fingers and slowly a form emerges.

It appears that what the potter is doing is drawing a form out of a lump of clay that is somehow already present within the clay, waiting to be summoned forth.

That, the ancient prophet said, is exactly who God is and how God works in the world and in individual lives: not coercing, but gently; not forcefully, but lovingly.

And so God will act, we believe, will come down, not by an act of violent tearing apart, but in the gentlest, quietest way—like in the birth of a child. God will come, we believe, not as a military conqueror, destroying enemies and putting things right, but as a

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gentle man of gracious purpose who will teach, and practice the most astonishing things:

that it is better to forgive than exact revenge.

that it is better, happier in fact, to give than to get,

it is better to trust than to fear,

that it is a far better to love than to hate.

Jesus taught and lived the most astonishing and new and radical ideas: that the peacemakers are blessed, that the meek and merciful are God's most favored ones, and finally that the best, happiest thing any one of us can do is give our lives away for his sake.

And the greatest reversal of all: that real strength, real power, is not in muscular strength, nor in planes and drones, bombs and rockets, nor in guns raised in fear and with an obscene need to control and maintain our position of privilege.

But real strength, the strength of our Lord Jesus Christ, the strength for which there are no regrets, is, of all things, vulnerable love that will suffer; that real power is in humility.

The willingness to learn a new thing or two.

And then Jesus will, himself, do the most amazing thing:

His is a holy love that will suffer and die and rise again to show us and anyone who will see and listen that the love of God is the most powerful force in the world,

a love from which nothing will ever separate us, a love that is God's response to our deepest yearning: Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.

Dear God, you better do something quick.

GOD HAS!