

**THE OLD MEETING HOUSE  
EAST MONTPELIER CENTER, VT**

**November 27, 2011  
Advent 1B**

**“Already and Not Yet”  
Preached by the Rev. Elissa Johnk**

1 Corinthians 1:3-9  
Mark 13:28-37  
Isaiah 64:1-9

O Lord, that you would tear open the heavens and come down to meet us, now, here, in this moment. Or better yet, God, tear us open, that we might meet you not in the sky, but in ourselves, through these my words, and through the meditations of all our hearts.

Amen.

My mentor and former colleague, Martin Copenhaver, was fond of a saying, the source of which I cannot recall off the top of my head, “if you take the mystery of religion, and remove all paradox, you have a preacher.”

It is sometimes easy to forget that the central challenge of preaching is not to explain what the text says, but to break it open for us all to hear anew in our own lives. Sometimes there is a lesson, often there are a hundred lessons that break open. Sometimes, however, the lessons that break open are, in fact, questions. I believe that is the case of this morning’s texts, indeed, of all of the Season of Advent. And so we begin our liturgical year not, as is usually the case in our secular life, at the beginning, but *before* the beginning of our common story, in a time of preparation. A time not for answers, but for questions: questions for our texts, for our faith, for ourselves.

Advent is a paradox. It is the story of something that has already happened, and the story of something yet to come. And today, on this the very first day of our liturgical year, I am going to resist putting these texts into a nice little package, wrapped up with a pretty Christmas bow. After all – I believe that is the work of Michelle and our youth on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Instead, let us tell the stories of these texts, and listen again, for any patterns, questions, or truths that might emerge – listen, for the word of God, speaking to you.

The first story starts about 60 generations<sup>1</sup> ago. So think back to your mother and your father. Your mother’s mother, and your father’s father’s father. Think of those pictures, sepia toned, fuzzy at the edges, but crystal clear in the eyes. Think of all that was different in their lives. The lack of electricity, the lack of heat, the rough, home-grown living. Then multiply that by 20. Then think of all that is the same

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am using generation in both the familial and cultural sense – averaging the 20 year standard for a familial generation, and the 50-100 years for a cultural generation.

between your life and that generation. The look on your great-great-grandmother's face as she cradles her first baby in the sunshine, in a rare photographed moment. That slight crinkle in the corner of great-uncle Jimmy's eye – the one you see staring at you every morning in the mirror. Take those similarities, and multiply them by 20.

Do that, and you have Isaiah, one of the most beloved, and certainly the most-quoted prophet from the Hebrew Bible. Actually, you have third Isaiah – a disciple of a disciple of a disciple of the first Isaiah – as much different, and alike, as you are from your great-great-great grandmother.

It is 530 bce, and Isaiah – or the group of people who follow within the philosophical school of the original Isaiah - is likely an older man for his time. As a young boy, he watched his hometowns – Judah or Jerusalem – destroyed by the Babylonians. Stone by stone they had destroyed the temple, God's house, carried away its gold and valuables. He has sat at the feet of his teachers, heard again and again that God would vindicate them, that God would not let Jerusalem fall for long, that soon they would be freed – and oh, oh how glorious that moment was when God acted – when Cyrus, understanding himself to be acting on a vision from God – issued that edict of release, sent them back home, laden with their own treasures, free to be and build.

And he has lived through that moment of despair, and that moment of ultimate rejoicing, and he finds himself here: in a civil war.

Not a war like that of our great-great-great ancestors, with guns and lead, but exactly the war of our great-great-great ancestors – a war of ideas. The Zadokites, a group of Jews, have been given control of the new city. Instead of acknowledging only Yahweh as the “one true God,” they have also acknowledged the sovereignty of the Persian emperor Cyrus – their liberator, their emperor. And Isaiah, clinging to the notion of shalom – the principles of peace and unity that are greater than any one people – is afraid. He has seen the fighting. He has seen the struggles to rebuild the temple. He has seen his people starve while the bickering continues, and so he exclaims to God: sure, we “sinned;” but God, he says, it was because “you hid yourself we transgressed.” I know that “we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you;” but God, God, you “have hidden your face from us.”

And so, he exclaims, stop the fighting, stop the bickering, and the poverty and the war. Stop it all, God. Please, O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

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A little over 10 generations or 500 years later, we find him – or maybe her – in a hurry. She may not have known Jesus, but she knows Peter. And Peter's words about Jesus are tattooed on her heart. A war is raging, and the Romans are threatening to destroy the temple – just like Jesus had said. They're going to do it, the Romans are going to tear it down, and what then? What will happen to them all?

And instead of listening, the people – her people, the Jews of every sect are rejecting her message. Not only the Romans, but her own people. She is trying to tell them – don't you see, it's happening, it's all

happening – just like Isaiah said, just like Jesus said – the temple is coming down, the evil of this generation is taking root. Like the fig tree, read the signs. But no one will hear. They – all of them, these followers of Jesus through the lens of Mark - are kicked out from their homes, from their families. They are not welcome in the temple. They are welcome nowhere. And so she writes. Writes it all down so no one will forget – to spread it around in the hopes that more people will prepare, be urged into love before it is too late. We don't know when: “about the day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven,” not even, she writes, not even “the Son.” So “therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!” God will tear open the heavens and come down – again.

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At the same time, miles away, we find ourselves in a nouveau-riche, gaudy Grecian port town, sitting at a dinner table with a group of people who had largely been left out of the economic boom. They are the outcasts. Many of them do not eat well, except for these gatherings, where they drink a cup and eat bread and speak of a prophet they never knew. Often those who are the most hungry are the last to eat, victim to a social stratification, even here. The air is hushed. The tension outside the walls of the house breathes itself into the air of the room, and instead of fighting with the world outside, they fight with each other. This place of hope has become like the world outside – conflicted, angry, selfish, starving. Soon enough they will be persecuted, but now, they persecute themselves.

And Paul, he tries – he holds his head in his hands and tries to explain what it means to love – what it means to hope, and there is no other place to start but this vision of love, laid out by Isaiah – this place of Shalom, of peace greater than any partisanship. “Brothers and sisters,” he writes, “Brothers and sisters, I give thanks for you,” for each and every one of you – rich or poor, talented each in your own way, made stronger by your faith in the coming time of peace. Hold onto that hope – that time is coming, I promise. “God is faithful.”

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“What is it that draws us to the stable year after year?” the poet asks.

Traveling back up those generations, watching all that is similar and all that is different from Isaiah to our great-great-grandmothers, we arrive *now*, in this moment when we begin to make our yearly journey back to the stable– complete with slamming doors and innkeepers and, I've even been told – occasionally even an angel Gabriel on a zip line.

Bible stories are repetitive – inter- and intra-textually. Isaiah has seen salvation, and calls for it again. The Markan evangelist has seen salvation, and is watching for it again. Paul has seen redemption, and even amongst his bickering people, he knows it will come again. These stories were meant to be read orally, and so they hit the key features over and over and over again. We, however, live in a different time. There are few stories that we have memorized, few things we enter into repeatedly. The Star Trek Series, perhaps, or a favorite Woody Allen movie, the snippets of a favorite poem, the loving refrain of Goodnight Moon.

And yet, this one *story*, this *one*, we re-tell, with a manger, and a star, and a little baby boy. The story of seeing salvation, and calling for it again.

So what is it that draws us to the stable year after year? Perhaps it is the fact that we are as alike to Isaiah, and Mark, and Paul, as we are different. Perhaps we have seen the story of God's redemptive work, each in our own way, we have seen peoples delivered and healed and fed. We have glimpsed, in this story of a beautiful baby boy, capitol-T Truth.

And yet, we still know a world of famine, and war, and greed, and perhaps most destructive yet, complacency. We still know the longing for God to tear open the heavens and shower down a new heaven and a new earth. We have *already* seen the *good news*. And *yet* still we see the channel 7 news.

This is not simply the central paradox of Advent. It is the central paradox of Easter, of Christianity, of religion and of life from generation to generation to generation – the paradox of the already, the yet, and the not yet. Like any good spiritual truth it deserves to be wrestled with. To enter fully into the mystery of Christmas, we must treat it as exactly as that – a mystery for each and every one of us to solve for ourselves.

*What is it that draws YOU to the stable year after year? What “already” emerges for you, year after year? What “not yet” are you hoping to find? Where do you find it? Where do you need it?*

So hear again these words of question and promise, of already, yet, and not yet, echoed in Isaiah the first, second and third, and Mark, and Paul, and your great-grandmother, waiting, perhaps, for this very moment:

“O God, you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down [...] From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you [...Yet ] We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. [...] O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

“Surely I tell you, this [evil] will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away [...] about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son [...so] be aware.”

And as you are aware, brothers and sisters of the Old Meeting House, as you enter into the spirit of Advent, as you long for whatever it is that awaits you at that straw-filled manger, hear these words of Paul:

Know that “God is faithful, and by God you have been called into [this] fellowship. [...] In every way you have been enriched [by Jesus], in speech and knowledge of every kind [...] so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait...”

Amen.