

You may have noticed that so far in this Advent season, I have not preached about the baby Jesus. I am not against Jesus being born- in fact, soon we will talk about his birth; it's just that I've wanted to emphasize the meaning of Advent, the sense of waiting and hoping, or even just the idea of keeping on, of hanging on. There are times in our life experience when we must simply carry on- whatever situation befalls us- when faith and faithfulness will keep us going. And we can pray and hope for God to move into our lives and ease our hurt or doubt, to come to us and heal and save. But God never comes at our command; God coming never happens automatically- if it did we wouldn't be ready, wouldn't recognize it. Perhaps we can say it better this way, that God is always coming to us, but we must be in the right place to see him.

Christmas, the day doesn't just sit there on the calendar all by itself. Other meaningful days come before and after. There is in our nation, a marketing build-up to Christmas that seems to get longer each year- the music and decorations in the stores and advertising on TV that begin the season earlier and earlier- all to get our minds ready to buy. Just so, for us, Christmas is prefaced by Advent, the spiritual build-up for the Lord's coming. As we seek the spiritual meaning of the

season, we should never skip ahead to Christmas, else it may become merely a time of sentimental hope or blind faith. Advent is the grown-up part of Christmas, and maybe we should think of it as work, as an act of faith and an occasion for us to ponder all over again the meaning of hope and peace and joy and love; to get ourselves to the place where we can understand who we are, and there, we may be able to see who the baby is. In today's sermon text, we can hear the complaint of God's people in a time of suffering or uncertainty; they search for God even when it seems God isn't paying attention; still they keep on, hoping, even as God remains silent. Like us at Advent, waiting. And they can trust in God's goodness and faithfulness because they remember what God has done for them in the past. That is our Advent task, to remember, because remembering prepares us for the time when God, at last, comes to us.

We may not think of this Psalm as an Advent reading- it isn't one of our usual ones, but there it is in the lectionary for today. "O God, restore us, stir up your might, and come to save us! Let your face shine on us and we will be saved!" Maybe that sounds more like it. But what we don't expect is this worrisome complaining, "how long will you be angry," the Psalmist asks, "you aren't even listening to us." "You have given your people tears for food and tears for drink,

and made us fools in front of our neighbors.” Yes, this is difficult stuff for religious people to say; it’s hard for us even to hear. And yet we feel like that sometimes. Where is God, why isn’t God listening? It feels this way even during the Christmas season sometimes. Everybody else out buying presents, going to parties, laughing: it’s as though they aren’t listening to the hurt in the world, it seems they think that baby born a long time ago makes such a difference that they can close their eyes and ears to the suffering out there: “Peace on earth and goodwill,” that’s already happened, right? But we know, real hurt feels utterly alone, and the sentimentality of the season and all those laughing people appear false and uncaring. We understand; we have all suffered enough to feel left out.

But here is the way to make it right, for sufferers and for revelers: by remembering. We can remember the reason for our joy, and if we are among those who are alone, who hurt, and feel left behind, we can remember the reason there may yet be joy ahead: look what God has done- here is how we can continue to pray, despite war and shootings and divisions- look what God has done. The Psalmist recounts the history of his people, God delivering the people out of slavery, God bringing “the vine” (we may think of it as the family tree of God’s chosen ones) out of Egypt, God providing a place for it, planting it and making it

grow. God watching over it so that it took root and filled the land and sent out branches and shoots beyond the boundaries of the nation. Yes, there was mourning and pain in the time of the Psalmist, and there may be unrest and hurt in our time, but the vine survived and survives; God is still at work among us. Maybe we don't see or sense God with us, but the continuing story affirms that God is still watching, still cares. And so we can still pray, "Come, O God; restore us, O God of hosts." This is how we show our faith, by praying and hoping even amid the noise and the loneliness; believing that God works his will for the sake of others even when our hearts are restless.

This is how I read verses 12-13, which accuse God of breaking down the walls, that blame God for the disruption of our secure circumstances. "Why?" the writer asks, "Look, everyone that passes by can pluck the fruit off our vine." Yes, that is exactly what God is doing in this passage; God is giving the blessings of Israel to other peoples. It may cost God's chosen ones some insecurity, fear, and worry, but that is the cost of faithfulness; *it is the price God's people must pay for the gifts God wants to give to all people.*

So this Advent, and this Christmas soon to follow, let us know that when God breaches the wall, it may cause us pain and uncertainty, but it also may make

a feast for others and a reason for celebration. Oh, we like our walls because they keep us safe, but they also confine us; they keep us in, and they keep out faith. But when they are torn down, the light comes in and we can see far; and we can reach across the ruins and share friendship and hope.

Last night on TV was a program celebrating John Lennon's 75th birthday, with various music stars performing his songs. I truly enjoyed the show, but as it went on, I began thinking about how Lennon was such a polarizing figure in America, particularly his last years living in New York. So many people angry with him, for the kind of music he wrote and his lifestyle, for the cultural changes that he represented- and in many ways caused, and for his political views. But it occurred to me that for all his faults, and even for all the animosity directed towards him, his music was so hopeful: all you need is love; give peace a chance. Even his angry music, his protest music, his raucous revolutionary music were hopeful. Look, the singing of songs is hopeful, the act of confronting one's fears and hurts and making music of them is hopeful. Lifting up you voice, and never giving up, is hopeful.

It is the same with this psalm. That, for the writer and the nation he speaks for, in his anger or sorrow or confusion, just praying the prayer, just saying the

words and holding on in the difficult time, is hopeful. Simply facing the silence and speaking to God is an act of faith. Asking God “how long” and wondering “why” in honest, plaintive speech to God, is real faith, and prepares us for the Lord’s coming.

And it is true for this season, when the nights are dark and cold, when the trees are barren, and the vine bears no fruit, and as we watch and know the reality of the blood and the hunger in the sad world around us; still we can hope that light and peace are coming. Because we remember what God has done, and we trust that God sees, and will come again to save. And so, we gather here this season, this day and every Sunday, to encourage one another while we wait, to sing together even before our hope arrives; and to be ready when it does; and to be able to believe- in whatever manner God comes, for it will test us. God coming as a baby will test our faith.

But the testing will prove what we know already about God, that God moves slowly and saves one step at a time. God sending a baby, how surprising, and how patient! And how much it requires of us: that we must keep on believing, keep on holding on; that we must be diligent and remain faithful to do the work; and remembering that God’s promises always come true.

