

“From a Distance”
Isaiah 64:1-9
December 3, 2017
Advent 1
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

For the last couple of generations this church has been blessed by the strong faith and the wonderful voice of Lois Martin. Lois has sung in the choir for about 75 years and for much of that time she has been an occasional soloist, to the delight of all who heard her. The last few years, although she sings in the choir when she can, she has not felt that her voice is strong enough to do the solo work anymore. But several years ago, she decided that she wanted to try to do one more solo for us on a Sunday morning and she very beautifully sang the song, “From a Distance.” If you weren’t here that day, you might remember Bette Middler singing the same song on the radio in years past.

“From a distance there is harmony,
and it echoes through the land.
And it's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves,
it's the heart of every man.

And God is watching us, God is watching us,
God is watching us from a distance.”

From a distance. Is that how we see God? The song tells us that if we step back and get the perspective of God, if we see the big picture, then our petty differences seem like nothing. But so often we see God at a distance. We think of God as someone out there, a judge off in the heavens looking down on us, a father figure in the sky somewhere. We look up when we think of God, because we think of God as “up there.”

Isaiah certainly sees God that way. And he’s a bit frustrated by that. This portion of the book of Isaiah is sometimes called Third Isaiah, because it is very different from what has come before. The first part of Isaiah dates from the late 8th century and is warning the people to be faithful to God otherwise they may be in for some tough times. The second part of Isaiah is another author

who is writing during the time of the Babylonian Captivity. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had destroyed Jerusalem, burned down the Temple and taken many of the people back to Babylon as slaves. Second Isaiah is a prophet of hope and joy that the people are about to be set free and return to the promised land, that God has not abandoned them, and they will have their fortunes restored. Third Isaiah is a little darker. He may be the same author as Second Isaiah, but the situation has changed. The people have returned to Jerusalem, but it is not all milk and honey. Times are hard. They have to work at rebuilding not just the temple, but most of the cities had been destroyed by the Babylonians, the fields have not been tended, there are no flocks of sheep or goats anymore. And they still have enemies all around. Hunger and hard work are staring them in the face. Why can't things be like they used to be? Why can't God step in and save us like he did during the time of Moses or Joshua? O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!

Do you ever feel that way? That God is off in heaven somewhere and that he isn't really paying attention? If he were, don't you think he'd step in and help me? Help us? We could certainly use God's help, don't you think? Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means coming, and it is all about waiting for God to come to us. We decorate the church, we break out our purple cloths for the pulpit and lectern, we teach the kids that purple means to prepare and that we are preparing for Christmas. But it's still a way away. It's coming, but it's not here yet. Advent means coming, but it's all about waiting. Isaiah was waiting for God to take action, as we all are sometimes. But what if it's not that kind of coming that Advent is about? What if, instead of thinking about waiting for an event to happen in the future, Advent is really about a coming in proximity not in time? We think of Advent as a time to prepare for God coming to us a few weeks from now as we get ready to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. But what if

Advent is about coming because it's about God coming close to us. What if God is not only off in his heaven somewhere, but what if God is as close to us as a potter is to the clay? What if Advent is not waiting for an event in time but recognizing that Advent is about the closeness of God today?

Fredrick Buechner says, "Advent" means "coming" of course, and the promise of Advent is that what is coming is an unimaginable invasion. The mythology of our age has to do with flying saucers and invasions from outer space, and that is unimaginable enough. But what is upon us now is even more so—a close encounter not of the third kind but of a different kind altogether. An invasion of *holiness*. That is what Advent is about.”¹

We have the idea of God who is coming at the end of history or God who came 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, but what about the God who is already here, who is closer to us than we could ever realize. Advent means coming, not like a space invader, but like your next breath. We aren't really that comfortable with a God who is that close, who invades our space. Sometimes we would like God to be off in his heavens. I'm not all that comfortable with God being so close that he knows everything. Every word, every thought, every emotion. God sees it all. God sees all of me, all of you. We are so often like the scared child at night, who afraid of imagined monsters in her room, hides under the covers, thinking that if she can't see them, they won't be able to see her. We don't really want to be seen by God, do we? In all our weakness, our pettiness, our prejudices? The prophet closes his eyes, blames his problems on God who isn't there. But God is there. God is here. Advent tells us that God is closer than we ever thought. Yes, God is in his heavens, but God is also as close as the potter is to the clay. God is out there, but he's also in here, as close as our neighbor sitting by us. Yes, God is the almighty creator, but he is also present in his creation, in the blowing leaves and the late fall sunlight and the squirrel searching for the last few acorns. Yes, God is preparing for us that banquet beyond this life when all the nations will sit down together, but he is also here inviting us to this meal, to eat and drink

¹ Buechner, Frederick. *The Clown in the Belfry*.

with him today. Yes, God is the Lord of hosts on high, but he is also as close to you as your next breath, speaking to you not from the top of a mountain, but in the silence of your conscience, in the unexpected thought, in the warmth of the loving heart. The present we get at Advent is the presence of God.

That's what Christmas is really all about. The incarnation of Jesus Christ, the birth of the child in Bethlehem is about God not tearing open the heavens, but being born in a stable. God does not always split open the heavens. Remember that even Jesus' closest disciples longed to call down fire from heaven and to brandish swords, Jesus compared his coming kingdom to tiny mustard seeds and to the imperceptible but certain fermentation of yeast. In his classic advent hymn *O Little Town of Bethlehem* (1868) Phillip Brooks, a university preacher at Harvard where today a house is named for him, describes the discipline of patient waiting for the invisible kingdom:

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.

No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,

Where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in.²

God is watching us from a distance. A distance that is no distance at all.

² Clendinin, Daniel. *The Journey with Jesus. Drinking Tears by the Bowlful: Waiting*. November 27, 2005.