

Date: November 27, 2005

SUNDAY: Advent 1

SERMON: *Waiting for God to Act*

Text(s): Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

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In about a week, Hollywood is going to release a film version of the children's classic, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first in the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis that have been best-sellers since he wrote them back in the 1940's. I've lost count of how many times we read through that series aloud with our children, or how many times they later read through them themselves, but it was a lot. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, if you don't know the story, four brothers and sisters are playing in an old manor house, when they discover quite by accident that if they get inside a large old wardrobe in an empty room, they are magically transported to another world, the world of Narnia, where things are very different.

Narnia, when the children discover themselves in it, is very cold and snowy. The inhabitants they meet in this magical land, some of whom are talking beavers, tell them that it's always winter, in fact, because the country is under the domination of a Wicked Witch. In fact, given the early taste of winter we had this I'm wondering if the wicked witch has escaped from Narnia and taken up residence here. The heroine, nine-year old Lucy complains, "It's always winter, but it never gets to Christmas." That's similar to the feeling we have around here about the middle of March, isn't it? "It's always winter, and it never gets to spring."

Doesn't it strike you as a bit odd that the beginning of the new year on the Christian calendar has this theme of delayed expectations and tedious waiting and painful frustration, as its principal theme, when everything else in our culture is already focused on Christmas? On Thanksgiving evening, the Philadelphia TV stations devoted 15 minutes of air time to stories about people lining up for Black Friday's orgy of Christmas shopping. Yet, our texts for this first

Sunday of Advent call us to contemplate the experience of waiting, of being on hold, frustrated expectations. Advent speaks more to the feelings of God's absence than of God's presence. And perhaps it is precisely because this experience of waiting in the darkness of unknowing, this experience of the absence of God, this experience of being on hold, is such a universal human experience, that it sets the mood of this first of the Gospel seasons.

The poignant prayer of lament in our Old Testament lesson from Third Isaiah illuminates this experience powerfully. "*Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence! . . . We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, blow us away. . . . Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.*" What pathos there is in that prayer! What a heart-rending expression of powerlessness and disappointed hopes! What a description of a people who are waiting for God to act! There's a ring of reality to this cry. It's a cry that has sometimes come from our own hearts, is it not? "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down! Give us a sign that gives us the hope that better days will arrive."

Douglas Burton-Christie, in an article entitled *The Grace of Unknowing*, tells of his and his wife's long and unsuccessful struggle to have children. As the months and years went by, they consulted specialists, undertook fertility drug therapy, and finally, his wife underwent surgical procedures, but all to no avail. Nothing worked.

Finally, he said, they came to the end of their rope. Both of them were emotionally exhausted; they had reached the end of their capacity to go on hoping. Every step they had taken had promised to be the solution, and every time, the procedures failed to produce the hoped-for results. And they were powerless to do anything about it.

That, he said, was the most frustrating thing about the whole process. That

powerlessness forced them to consider the most painful question of all: suppose they really couldn't ever have a child. Then what? They experienced a deep sense of desolation. When they finally reached the point at which they began to consider adoption, he said it was the last step in a long series of relinquishments, of letting go: they had to accept that they never would have a biological child of their own. Gradually, as they got their minds accustomed to the idea of adoption, their sense of desolation seemed to lighten. They came to terms with their grief and disappointment and began to hope again. Adoption might not have been the way they had dreamed or hoped of having a child, but it was becoming their way.

They went through the process with a well-known adoption agency. They were made clearly aware that the birth mother might change her mind, but during the months before the birth of their adoptive child, they got to know the mother, and she seemed very sure of her decision. They knew that the child was a boy, and they picked out a name: they would call him James. They furnished their nursery. They envisioned themselves caring for this tiny infant boy who would soon grace their lives.

And late one night, when the phone rang, they eagerly answered it, expecting that it was the news they had been waiting for, the birth of their son-to-be. They were right, but they were completely unprepared for the next words they heard from the agency representative, "The mother has changed her mind. She's going to keep the baby."

Burton-Christie said that at that moment all he knew was raw grief and rage. The hurt was indescribable. They felt that they had been allowed themselves to be duped into believing that happiness really could be theirs after so long a time of disappointment. Initially he was angry at the birth mother who changed her mind, but he got over that fairly quickly. He knew that she too was unprepared for the feelings that overtook her

once the baby was born. He knew also that he was angry at God or the universe. He wasn't sure why, he just knew he felt betrayed. Hadn't he already given up enough when he had accepted that he and his wife would never bear their own children?

That experience, and others like it, are common ones to human beings. That one is particularly poignant for me, because my youngest brother and his wife also tried unsuccessfully for ten years to have children before they finally chose the route of adoption. Disappointment, desolating losses, deep and painful wounds of the soul— these are the experiences that no one escapes, not if you're a human being living on planet Earth. Some of us here are caring for aging parents or even a spouse who has Alzheimer's disease or some other form of dementia, and know all too well the feelings of helplessness in the face of it. We're all familiar with that sense of helplessness in the face of events or situations we can't control. To be human is to spend time waiting in the darkness, waiting for God to act, in a delay that seems endless.

Advent is the gospel season that gives voice to our experiences of desolation, of powerlessness, of frustration, of delay, of diminished hopes, of painful losses, the sense that we're waiting for something. We can't always name what it is; it just feels like life is on hold. But these texts for Advent tell us that it is really God we're waiting for. When the night is dark enough, when the despair is deep enough, when the doubt is strong enough, when the frustration is agonizing enough, we get honest. We confess that we are clay pots who cannot shape ourselves into our own ideal image. We are clay in the hands of the potter, and so we are waiting to see what will emerge from the potter's wheel.

St. Mark, in our gospel lesson, establishes the horizons of this Advent waiting, this "winter of our discontent" that never seems to get to

Christmas. Mark gives us a goal, a destination, so that we do not lose hope as we wait for God to act. That goal is the coming Day of the Lord, in which all God's creative and redemptive purposes for the world will be revealed and clarified.

He juxtaposes two seemingly contradictory sets of images to speak of that Day. On the one hand, he speaks in cosmic, apocalyptic images of a darkened sun and moon, falling stars, the shaking of the cosmic powers. It's appropriate language if you're talking about the End of the World. But then in the next sentence he switches metaphors. When you see the fig tree put out its leaves in the spring, you know that summer is not far behind, he says. So it will be with the coming of the Son of Man.

How are we, the readers, supposed to make sense of such contradictory signs of God's coming to act? How can we hold apocalyptic images of cosmic upheavals and budding fig trees in the springtime together in a way they make sense? The budding of the trees in spring is something we almost overlook, it happens so naturally and so quietly, and so dependably. We might also overlook cosmic upheavals if we're not attentive. Don't we already pay even less attention to stories on our televisions that speak of global catastrophes: a tsunami here, a hurricane there, an earthquake somewhere else, a massacre in that country or a suicide bomb attack in another than we give to the report of what the Dow-Jones is doing or whether Tom Brady and Teddy Bruski will get the Patriots into the playoffs? We might not give anymore notice to the shaking of the powers of heaven than we do to the emergence of first green leaves of spring.

Yet vigilant attention is called for if we are not to lose hope in the dark night of the soul, when it seems like neither our own personal situations nor the world's situation will ever see the dawn of Christmas morning. We have to watch for the signs: a budding fig tree in the spring heralds the shaking of the heavens. It takes close attention, it takes expectant waiting,

it takes faith and hope to see that Day's approach.

Douglas Burton-Christie, in describing his and his wife's anguish after receiving that phone call saying that the birth mother had changed her mind and that they would not have a little son named James after all, says that during that experience he began noticing things he hadn't noticed before. He found himself listening more carefully to other peoples' stories of loss and disappointment and frustration, and he was surprised to discover how much hurt there was all around him. And this brought him to a point of what he terms "an honesty to the real." By that he means the courage to face whatever life confronts us with and an openness in one's relationships that permits us to give voice to those struggles and pains. The lack of honesty, he discovered, that led him, as it leads all of us, to say, "I'm fine," when we're not fine at all is really based on our fear that self-disclosure and honesty will lead to humiliation or rejection. We figure it's better to play it safe. Better to pretend that we're OK.

Yet, life has a way of breaching our walls and defenses, of getting behind our fear and forcing us to be honest. When all our devices for coping with the unknown, with the frustrating, with the tedious have broken down, we find ourselves face to face with ourselves, with others, and with God, and in those encounters, we begin to discover something wonderful. We begin to discover freedom and real community as we take the risks of opening ourselves to others.

Some months after that devastating phone call that left Douglas Burton-Christie and his wife desolate and defenseless, they got a second phone call from the adoption agency. They were no more prepared for this one than they had been for the first. They were still learning to relinquish the illusion of control that they had lived with so long, so this call caught them unprepared as well. But the word came: there was a baby girl for them. He writes,

Julia Rose is asleep in the other room now. I do

not know how this happened, how she came to be here. That, I realize, is one of the ironies of the whole process: her mysterious arrival is also about unknowing, about all that lies hidden in the darkness waiting to emerge into the light of day . . . I am learning, as I did on that day when my arms first enveloped her tiny body, to drink in the mysterious grace of unknowing.

Learning to drink in that mysterious grace of unknowing is the spiritual work of Advent. We are all waiting for God to act. And all of us need to learn that “honesty to the real” of which Burton-Christie speaks. We all need to learn how interdependent we are on each other. We are still being called by Christ to wait with vigilance, with alertness, keeping awake so that we will recognize the signs of his coming. Whether the resolution comes sooner or later, the point is, that it will come. God will act. God will tear open the heavens and come down, in God's own time. Meanwhile, the Master Potter is at the potter's wheel and is shaping the clay into vessels of rare beauty and usefulness, if we are content to be that clay in the potter's hands.

Cf. Burton-Christie, D., "The Grace of Unknowing". *Weavings*, 1993. VIII(Sept/Oct):p. 17-25.