

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 Mark 1:1-3
Billy Griffin

Advent is a word that means “coming or arrival.” Many contemporary observers of Advent devote each of the four Sundays before Christmas to a special theme: hope, peace, joy and love. This is also a season of waiting and looking back over our shoulders or looking at a rear-view mirror, waiting in darkness and waiting for light to break, but it’s not the looking back over our shoulders and worried about what might be creeping up from behind politically or economically. It may be one of the most difficult times of the Christian year for some of us because we are impatient people. “Patience is the art of hoping.” (Lucde Clapiers)

The four gospels were written after the fact, a looking back over their shoulders point-of-view to make a statement about Jesus. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John begin their stories differently. Matthew describes Jesus’ family tree; Luke describes his birth; John describes his cosmic nature. However, Mark begins with an affirmation: “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” From this affirmation he moves directly to the word of the prophet Isaiah who spoke of an age of justice, a time when the Messiah would come and make the crooked ways straight. Mark quickly sets the stakes high. He minces no words but goes right to the heart of the matter. Something tremendous has happened, an intervention or confrontation. The words “coming or arrival: can arouse excitement and anticipation. Intervention or confrontation gets attention. They are crystal clear, no embroidering. It is a new exodus, a new kingdom, a new prince who elsewhere is called the “Prince of Peace.”

The Jews were waiting for the coming of a charismatic messiah who would throw off the chokehold that Rome had on Israel and restore Israel. Jesus said: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matt. 10:34) Their prayers were answered! But wait: this Jesus, like Elijah before him, disturbed the peace, the status quo, not only for Rome but for Israel and the whole world. It was not a literal sword he spoke of but a sword of mercy and justice. Needless to say, he was not the Messiah the Jews waited for or expected. “What is good news for some is bad news for others.” He posed a threat to the church crowd and Rome must have considered him to be an insurrectionist of some sort.

Rome, the “New World order,” was for the subjected people a devastating “New World disorder.” It had established global domination and economic subjection of conquered people. Tax collections of the poor, the peasants, had been “ratched-up” under Herod, Rome’s puppet king. The economically oppressed paid a temple tax, plus 10% tithes and offerings, plus one-third of their total crop. There were home and farm foreclosures and deep debt. This was the status quo.

Rome’s foreign policy of “global domination” kept people under control by terrorism. There were practices of crucifixion, mass slaughter, enslavement, massacres of whole towns and annihilation of whole peoples: dehumanization of the highest order. They hadn’t discovered waterboarding.

There was not a separation of church and state. Caesar was not only emperor, he was also considered “god.” The state was the church and the king appointed the high priest of the Jewish people. This was that status quo.

Jesus did not raise an army or practice violence, but he did trouble the religious and civil authorities. He was neither a terrorist nor a politician, but here is where the rub comes; he demanded mercy and

justice and proclaimed a kingdom that transcends all authorities of the world. That disturbs the status quo.

The status quo is nothing more than keeping things the way they are, keeping the social, political and economic order in place. Preserving the status quo is observing the law. “Law serves power to keep things the same; it is designed to insulate the beneficiaries of the status quo from the disturbance of change.” (Credo, William Sloane Coffin)

Mark quotes the prophet Isaiah who wrote, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners...to provide for those who mourn in Zion...For I the Lord love justice. I hate robbery and wrong doing.” (Isaiah 61:1-8) That disturbs the status quo! Isaiah writes about people where law and life are rigged against them.

Would Jesus scorn at the U.S. economic policy of making the wealthy wealthier? Not just the top 1% but also the group politicians cater to: “the middle class” who want more benefits and fewer taxes. Do we have a government of the well-off, by the well-off and for the well-off: cutting taxes for the wealthy while cutting social programs for the poor? You’d think “the greedy were the needy” and “the needy were the greedy.”

There needs to be a radical rethinking about power. Jesus inaugurated a new power arrangement. He is the proclaimer and bringer of a new age in which the claims of old power have lost their force and in which the joyous rule of God has begun to be fulfilled. He empowered the powerless.

Jesus’ ministry and mission put the powerful on notice. He spoke of a time when the crooked ways would be made straight, a time when the first shall be last and the last shall be first, a time when the nobodies of society would be somebody and that included almost everybody. He was concerned with political, economic and social issues, but not as a social reformer in the modern sense. Matters of justice were at the heart of his proclamation and ministry. He was not the first. Isaiah wrote, “I the Lord love justice.” Micah (6:8) wrote “O mortal, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

It is not enough to suffer with the poor. We must confront the people and systems that cause poverty. Justice isn’t a matter of charity. Charity keeps the social system the way it is. William Sloane Coffin, former chaplain of Yale University and former pastor of Riverside Church in NY has written in his book Credo (p.62-62):

“Had I one wish for the churches of America, I think it would be that they come to see the difference between charity and justice. Charity is a matter of personal attributes; justice is a matter of public policy. Charity seeks to alleviate the effects of injustice; justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it. Charity in no way affects the status quo, while justice leads inevitably to political confrontation. Especially I would hope that Christians would see that the compassion that moved the Good Samaritan to act charitably – that same compassion prompted Biblical prophets to confront injustice.”

Martin Luther King, Jr., better than any other public figure, understood the nature of compassion, that it does not exclude confrontation. “It was his message that it’s not enough to suffer with the poor; we must confront the people and systems that cause poverty. It was Martin’s message that you cannot set the captive free if you’re not willing to confront those who hold the keys.” (Credo, p. 43)

Jesus and the prophets remind us that God's heart is not always given to the church folks. He love us, yes, but it's that lost sheep, the missing coin, the disabled, and the jailed come first. That "rubs" some people the wrong way.

Some believe that caring for all people is "socialism." If caring for all people is socialism, then Jesus was a socialist when he said "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, give sight to the blind and healing to the broken hearted." Caring for all of God's people, particularly the "have-nots," the marginalized of society is not socialism! It is social justice! We cannot allow the far-right and the religious right to dictate the political debate. We cannot allow the "screamers" – Mr. Beck, Mr. O'Reilly and Mr. Limbaugh – to set the terms of social justice. Justice today is about immigration, justice for workers, adequate housing, food, clothing, adequate health care, environmental issues and peace, not simply the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice.

"Jesus Christ the Son of God." Proclaimed Mark. What a statement, what an affirmation! What does that mean to you and me? Maybe we all need to read the gospels again. You can even use the old "red-letter" edition of your Bible to find out. Not just something to read about.

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God" –it's not good advice but good news. The prophets had been waiting for this good news. That is, Jesus was the herald of the kingdom of God and that is good news. He inaugurated a new age, a new beginning. The light has penetrated the darkness. Our waiting is over. It is not about a nursery, a manger. It's about a life.

Frederick Beuchner has written "Advent is not about a passive twiddle your thumbs, yawning kind of waiting. The waiting appropriate for the beginning of the year is an active, eyes wide open, alert, clear mind kind of waiting not prompted by a visit to a nursery."

"God was in Christ." This is about incarnation. There has been disagreement since the first century about that incarnation means. The real point is that Jesus was in a special and maybe unique relationship to God. He was and is the surest clue we have about the nature and character of God, a new revelation. In him we receive a whole new understanding of God. He loved God more than anything in the world and demanded that kind of radical love from his disciples.

Do you want to know about God, the Holy Other? Do you want to know about justice? Do you want to know what it means to be human? Jesus modeled for us what it means to be human. He was fully human even though some have assumed he only "acted human." Get acquainted with Jesus the grown-up, the adult. What are you waiting for?

Some of you may have read or seen the play *Waiting for Godot*. It's about two tramps waiting by a tree for someone named Godot to come. The story is simple; Godot never comes. The play requires only two actors. The message, if there is one, is that life is about waiting for a god who never comes. The play suggests that people who do not hope are not disappointed. Beckett's play makes a statement that demands our attention. Do we wait for one who never comes? Beckett offers no gospel, no alternative to despair, no hope.

But there is hope, hope in the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God. The waiting is over. His work and our work are not finished. We don't like being reminded about this especially during the Christmas

Season. We've got too much on our minds. The work we have been called to do is repair the damage that has been done to the Kingdom by our own inattention and inaction.

By all means, let us enjoy putting up the manger, repairing the nativity set, but recognize the followers of Jesus did not seem to have returned to a stable where he was born to create a tourist site. The damage they were interested in was restoring lives – a task we are still engaged in. They knew, as we should know, that to know God is to do justice.

Advent and Christmas can become a diversion from the real world. What a nice escape! But Advent is neither escape nor despair from the real world. It would be a lot easier during these holidays if the forgotten people – the disenfranchised, the down-and-outs and the nobodies of the world – didn't need help. Our work is not finished. Advent is about confrontation, the intervention of God, the presence of "Emmanuel, God with us" and the authority of God over all creation. Advent reminds us that our hope in Jesus is not over and done with.

God is not finished. We've got work to do!

The time is now.

The time is right.

What are you waiting for?