

December 3, 2023  
The First Sunday in Advent  
St. Stephen's, Catlett; St. Andrew's, Ada  
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Isaiah 64:1-9  
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18  
1 Corinthians 1:3-9  
Mark 13:24-37

Waiting has become largely a thing of the past. It used to be that some people waited all year for the Black Friday sales. Now Black Friday can last a month. It used to be that people went to amusement parks knowing they'd be spending a lot of their time waiting in lines for the rides. Now you can pay a fee and go straight to the head of the line. In fact, waiting *in* line has become living *on* line. No more lines at DMV, at the bank, even in the grocery store. You can do it all by pushing computer buttons. I expect that's why so many of us had a hard time waiting anywhere else we have to show up in person.

The season of Advent is all about waiting. The opening verses of our passage from Isaiah beg God to "tear open the heavens and come down" (64:1). Psalm 80 begs God to "stir up His strength and come among us" (80:2). Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are "waiting for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:7).

Jesus speaks plainly about what will happen when the waiting is over, but He also tells us that signs are all around us that He is near. When we begin to see leaves on trees we know that summer is coming; when it gets dark at 4:00 in the afternoon we know that winter is coming. But He also says, "When you see these things taking place, you know that He is near, at the very gates" (13:29). He wasn't talking about fig trees or time changes, so what things, exactly, was He talking about? The answer lies in the beginning of Mark 13, where the disciples are marveling about the beauty of the Temple in Jerusalem, and Jesus tells them that the Temple will soon be destroyed. When they asked Him what He was talking about, He went on to describe a period in which false Messiahs would be very convincing, when nations would rise up against nations, and when famines, plagues, and earthquakes would hold sway over the entire world (13:3-8). Strangest of all, Jesus said that "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (13:30). Some people will get hung up on that, but when in the history of the (so-called) civilized world have there not been wars, famines, plagues, and earthquakes? Like the poor, they will always be with us.

What's important is not the signs, but the promise that when we see those signs we will also know that "God is very near, at the gates." And we have those signs all around us, do we not? On top of the wars and endless natural disasters, we also have COVID's reminder that plagues – now called epidemics – are not a quaint relic of history, but are still very much with us. What's important is not the signs, but what we do with those signs. Paul's message to the Corinthians is every bit as important to us as it was to them: "The testimony of Christ has been strengthened in us so that we are not lacking in any spiritual gift as we wait for the revealing of our Lord."

When we see them all around us, says Jesus, we will know that He is very near. We'll only know it if we recognize the signs as signs not of a weary earth, but signs of an active, compassionate God, Who is not only waiting in the wings for His big entrance, but Who has also come among those of us who are waiting and watching for His presence with us.

We're a people who have in many ways forgotten how to wait, but neither our calendar nor God's timetable is subject to our control. Advent, then, is God's gift to us to wait, to anticipate the fullness of God's Kingdom, and most important, to see the signs and prepare ourselves for our place as inheritors of that Kingdom and full status in the eternal household of God.