

Longing Expectations

Isaiah 64:1-9

Crossroads Christian Church

November 30, 2014 Advent 1B

First of all, let me thank you for your prayers and expressions of concern over the troubles in my community. We're in no danger ourselves, but it is heartbreaking to see towns torn apart in rage. What hurts us and makes us angry is that outsiders came in and rioted, looted, and burned, using the grand jury decision as a pretext. Ferguson residents would know better than to loot and burn black-owned businesses. The actions of the looters also discredited many peaceful, nonviolent protesters who had legitimate grievances. We need to pray for reconciliation—that people of different races, of different economic groups, of different political stances, will talk together and more important listen to one another.

In *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* by Dr. Seuss, he tells of a place and time that comes in all of our lives, when we're waiting. In Seussian rhyme, it goes like this:

The Waiting Place

... for people just waiting.

Waiting for a train to go

or a bus to come, or a plane to go

or the mail to come,

or the rain to go

or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow

or waiting around for a Yes or No....ⁱ

It sounds familiar, doesn't it? Our whole nation waited for a grand jury decision that was made last Monday. And we waited to see what kind of response that decision would bring.

We each remember other waiting places. I remember five and a half years ago when Sandy and I were waiting for the birth of our youngest grandson. We spent the night, trying to sleep, more or less, in a lobby at the Evanston Women and Children's Hospital, concerned about the health of our daughter, concerned for the health of her unborn child, with anxiety and hope.

You may remember other waiting places—

waiting for a spouse or a son or daughter to come back from military deployment;
waiting for an upcoming wedding day;
waiting for the divorce papers to be signed;
waiting for the surgeon to come out from the operating room with good news or bad news;
waiting for a teenaged child to come home from a date;
waiting for a beloved parent to take his or her last breath in hospice care;
waiting...waiting...waiting.

In the Season of Advent, beginning today, the church is our waiting place. We all know the story by heart, but still, each year, we wait for the story to begin again. And the story begins not with an angel visiting Mary, or a trip to Bethlehem, but many years before that, when an exiled, battered, bedraggled minority group were able to leave their ghettos in Babylon and return home. It was a joyous, hopeful journey for those who had tenaciously held onto their Jewish faith—redefined it into a faith that wasn't centered in a temple, but was centered in the Word, in the Torah. Yet when they came home their city of Jerusalem and their temple lay in ruins. I'm saddened that a mile or two of West Florissant Avenue in Ferguson lay in ruins today—can you imagine the whole city being destroyed? The people who had remained in the land had intermarried with other groups and worshiped false gods; neighboring countries didn't want them to come back. It was a depressing, heartbreaking situation.

[slide 3] The last 11 chapters of the Prophet Isaiah's book speak to that situation. We thought we were coming home to God, but is God there to meet us? Our text today comes from chapter 64. "If only you would tear open the heavens and come down!

Mountains would quake before you

like fire igniting brushwood or making water boil.

If you would make your name known to your enemies,
the nations would tremble in your presence." (vs. 1-2) The passage goes on to recall how God had saved the people in times past; how God had judged the people for their sins and faithlessness. So verse 7 says, "We all have become like the unclean." God seems hidden, far away." But the prophet trusts

that God is still God—"You are our Father. We are the clay; and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand" (v. 8) and asks God for forgiveness and restoration.

Isaiah 64 is just one text from that time that is filled with longing. Please God, hear our prayers. Psalm 80, for example, is a prayer for restoration. Vs. 3 says, Restore us, God!

Make your face shine so that we can be saved."

That's why we sing during Advent, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, ransom captive Israel." We remember a people longing for deliverance; a people expecting God to come and save them, not because they deserved it, but because of who God is—a God slow to anger; a God who judges, but then forgives. In our own troubled times, we can learn from them. We can long for, we can expect, the day that our Lord will come: not by tearing open the heavens and making the mountains quake, but by becoming a baby born in Bethlehem. May Bethlehem's baby be born in our hearts. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

¹ Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go*, Random House, 1990. Quoted on SermonSuite.com, Nov 30 2014.