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“Hope at the Back Door”
A Sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Mark 13:24-37

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As we enter this Advent season, I get the feeling like never before in my life time that the world is holding its breath. That is a Frederick Buechner piece that I quoted in my letter to the congregation in the newsletter this week. We are holding our breath wondering what is next.

This weekend we learned of the devastation in Mumbai. As Black Friday began, we heard the news of a store clerk in Wal-Mart being trampled to death by people trying to get some great bargains. Two people were shooting it out in a Toys R Us. Holding our breath, because we are so accustomed to such terror.

Can we find a way to live with each other in peace? Can we find a way through the current economic crisis that has engulfed the world?

Holding our breath can be a stance of dread, of worry and concern. But there is in the biblical tradition a sense of holding our breath because we are expecting something good to happen.

Can something good happen with a new administration in Washington? Can something good happen as we find ways to work together in our own communities? Can we adopt the posture of holding our breath not in dread but in expectation?

As we enter this Advent season I think we find ourselves in a familiar situation with our ancestors the Israelites who uttered these words:

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” (*Isaiah 64:1*)

Advent begins for us with a prayer to God of lament, of desperation and powerlessness. Have you ever been at such a place in your life? Wondering what to do, where to go next and realizing that you were stuck? Maybe your only hope was for some kind of divine intervention.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

The writer is serious about this prayer of lament. The writer will not accept any pious statements about what God might do. You know what I mean:

“God never gives us more than we can bear.”

“In the darkest moments is when God shines a light.”

The prophet says, “I am tired of ‘playing’ Advent, tired of pretending something important is going to happen. I am not going to go through these motions any more. It has been too long without a sign from you. Do not just stand there God, do something for heavens sake.” In this lament, Isaiah notes the people are flat emotionally. They have lost the emotion to cry out to God and complain, “This is not the way you said it was going to be, help us find our way, you promised.”

Have you ever felt that way, wondering where in heaven or on earth God is?

This powerful prayer of lament in Isaiah contains two features of genuine Advent hope. Advent hope that we are not stuck on a wheel that keeps going around with more of the same. It encompasses a deep sense of desperation about things going out of control. “We beg you, God, to come down to intervene to enter the public square.”

Advent begins sometimes not in silence but with a loud knocking – knock, knock, knocking on heavens door. “Open the door, God, so that we can see and know that the promises you made to our ancestors, the promise you made to us in Christ is real.” That is the first movement of this Advent hope. A willingness to confront God and to ask God to be present.

Along with the desperate cry there also is the trust God will intervene. That is where holding your breath comes in the belief that God will make a difference, that God will as our ancestors said during the struggle for freedom God “makes a way out of no way”. We have evidence of God’s interventions in the past and we are hopeful even in our desperation.

In the Gospel lesson from Mark, we are encouraged to be awake, alert for God's coming among us. This is the strange thing about Advent, while we are knocking on the front door Jesus tells us to be alert because if we listen we will hear God knocking softly at the back door.

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in the 4th century said of Christ's first Advent: "The Lord did not come to make a display. God came to be made known according to our need and as we could bear it."

G.K. Chesterton put it this way:

"God came down and slipped in the back door – to surprise us from behind as if we found something in the back of our hearts that opened us up to the presence God."

I want to suggest this morning that you listen for the God who often knocks at the backdoor.

I heard a story on the radio this Thanksgiving about someone giving thanks. The person had grown up during the Great Depression, and he remembered how his mother loved to cook. She always cooked more than they could eat because she knew that people who did not have enough to eat would always come around at supper time to the backdoor. He said he was grateful that he had a mother who would feed those who came to the backdoor.

God sometimes knocks at the backdoor. God chose to enter our world in a backdoor way, in barn at the edge of town, that is where God breaks open the heavens and comes down. Not in a Macy's Thanksgiving parade kind of clamor but in the silence of a child crying, born to a young unwed mother. That is when Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled and the God of our ancestors tore open the heavens and came to be among us. Be alert, be awake, for you never know when God is going to show up at your backdoor. We learn that at this church everyday as we offer hospitality to strangers.

So in Advent we hold back and don't sing the joyful loud Christmas songs at first. We dress in somber purple, a color of remorse. It is warning not to be premature or presumptuous. But to acknowledge that we are mortals who need repair like clay in the divine potters hand. Listen and remain alert for Gods who has the power to restore us coming around the back.

Advent is not about Black Friday and shopping, it is not about Mall's and Christmas parties. Advent for us is about God. A God who breaks open the

heavens and comes down, in God's own way, in God's own time. God does not stop halfway, God in Christ knocks on the backdoor and meets us in our brokenness and pain, down in a manger, born to an unwed mother, all the way down to a man hanging from a cross between two thieves, down to an empty grave.

Listen carefully this advent, lest you miss this God knocking at your backdoor. Amen.