First Sunday in Advent

Is. 64:1-14  Psalm 80  Mark 13:24-37

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church  11-29-20

As one theologian once said, "There are three things about the season of Advent: there is the waiting, and there is the waiting, and there is the waiting;" something with which we are deeply familiar this year as we are all waiting for so many things… like a vaccine to be available for the general population, and with it an end to the Coronavirus…like the **chance** to gather again with our friends and family, the **opportunity** to worship together in our church buildings, the **gift** of receiving the Eucharist, the **unabashed joy** of singing, hugging, laughing out loud…

Many in our nation who feel the devastating effects of racism are still **waiting** for racial justice… Many who feel the devastating effects of poverty are still **waiting** for economic justice… And we are all **waiting** for an end to the bitter dispute over the results of the election…

And then of course there is the waiting any of us may be doing closer to heart and home as we wait for the chemotherapy to work, or the child to call… as we wait for the wound to heal, the anxiety to ease, the word of forgiveness to be spoken… (Reminding me of the survey taken on a busy New York street corner some years back in which passer-byes were asked what one thing they most longed to hear spoken to them; what one thing they were **waiting** most fervently to hear… The top three responses being, "I love you, I forgive you, supper is ready.")

It would be hard to deny that waiting is a common theme in the cultural moment in which we find ourselves… It would be hard to deny that for many in our communities, maybe including those of us gathered for worship this morning, this waiting is taking a toll on us emotionally, physically and spiritually…

And so it is helpful perhaps, to know that our faith has a good deal to say about this "waiting"… It's helpful to know that the Bible could very well be subtitled, "A Story about Waiting," as the Hebrew Scriptures are largely a chronicle of the People of Israel as they **waited** for God to come and save them just as they remembered God had done in the past (our text from Isaiah for this morning being such a plea for Yahweh's arrival in the devastating aftermath of Babylonian exile… What more plaintive words could be heard anywhere than these, directed to God in a time of utter despair… "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down…")

And the New Testament is a chronicle of the early Christians as they waited for the fullness of God's kingdom to dawn, that "kingdom come" being synonymous with the second coming of Christ for those "Christ ones" who sought to follow Jesus after his death, resurrection and ascension… (Mark, writing about 70 AD, admonishing just such a community to "keep

awake" for signs of that coming, as heard in our Gospel text for this morning; an arrival they thought was imminent)…

So we come to worship on this first Sunday in Advent grateful to know that the theme of waiting is not only a prominent theme in the whole of Scripture, but that there's an entire season of the Church year devoted to the endeavor…

And yet… and yet, as our waiting in the 21st century is not much oriented to either a God who would "tear open the heavens and come down to save us" in that Cecil B. DeMille kind of way, or to the imminent return of Christ in the "second coming," we may wonder just what our faith has to say to us **this morning** about either the **substance** or the **nature** of our Advent waiting…

A "wondering" that for me has found resonance and meaning in an article entitled "Jazz Vespers," written by award-winning religion journalist David Gibson… An article that tells the story about something that happened in his Brooklyn neighborhood over the course of eighty-two days starting in late March of this past year, when David Gibson's neighbor, Roy Nathanson, came out onto his second-floor porch with his alto saxophone, and at precisely five o'clock in the afternoon, performed a solo rendition of "Amazing Grace."

"These were the darkest days of the pandemic," David Gibson writes… "We had just gone into lockdown; the city was suddenly the global epicenter of the Coronavirus; and deaths and illnesses were spiking by the day, especially in our own zip code, which had one of the highest infection rates in the country…"

"Roy, a jazz musician, teacher and 'evangelist of music,' wanted to do something to push back against the despair that was spreading along with the disease," as David Gibson writes… "So he began with the national hymn of hope…. No encores, no singing… Roy came out onto his second-floor balcony one day and played 'Amazing Grace.' Next day, same thing… And over the coming days other musicians began to join him, with a kind of socially-distanced sidewalk ensemble taking shape…

In his article about this ensemble, David Gibson describes the growing number of musicians from the neighborhood joining in the five o'clock music-making… musicians originally from Pakistan, Haiti, Barcelona, Africa; people from every conceivable part of the world, every conceivable faith tradition, bringing congas, guitars, a stand-up bass, a melodica, a trumpet, as assortment of horns, banjos and flutes, coming to make music together (in a socially-distanced way) at five o'clock every afternoon…

In one part of his essay, David Gibson's description of what he calls the "daily liturgy" spells out the beauty of the unfolding ritual this way… He writes,

*The playlist began to vary, with recognizable favorites like "Stand By Me" followed by a stirring Billy Strayhorn number the next day. The death of Bill Withers on March 30 prompted renditions of "Ain't No Sunshine" and "Lovely Day," and then we got "Tennessee Waltz" and "My Favorite Things" and "Go Down, Moses."*

*In the first weeks, ambulance sirens were a mournful counterpoint to almost every performance. The Q train rumbled along the track behind Roy's house, its horn blasting on occasion. Delivery vans and box trucks made their way up the block, sometimes slowing to catch a few bars of music. Pedro the postman weaved through it all to deliver the mail. Curious passersby stopped to listen. Some were strangers, some neighbors. There were skateboarders and cyclists, dog walkers and strollers. All the colors and creeds of the neighborhood would stop and listen. Some wept, all applauded, and of course everyone began taking cellphone videos. We had to capture this moment.*

*"These jazz vespers gave shape to our extraordinary time," David Gibson writes in the conclusion of his essay, "a time that was otherwise so undifferentiated. Neighbors who knew each other by sight now knew each other by name; acquaintances became friends; friends introduced us to strangers…*

*"Ordinary time always returns, of course, and the final concert was on a sunny Sunday afternoon in late June. It was two hours of wonderful music… more songs, more people (socially distanced), the street blocked off. It ended with an a cappella "Amazing Grace." No instruments, just the crowd singing…*

*"The ritual has ended, but it continues to bear fruit. The musicians created a web-site called 5PM Porch Concerts, to raise money for community agencies helping the neighborhood recover from the pandemic. They set up a program to give music lessons on various front porches to any kid in the neighborhood, regardless of ability to play. Other plans are in the offing. Faith and hope are wonderful," David Gibson says at the end of his essay, "but charity (love) is the best."*

I share this essay by David Gibson because on this first Sunday of Advent because I think it has something to say about both the **substance** and the **nature** of our Advent waiting…

The **substance** of that waiting never being just what we might expect, as it never was for those whose stories we read in the Hebrew scriptures or in the New Testament… The People of Israel always waiting for the arrival of a day when Yahweh would come in power and might to restore Israel to the glory days of the Davidic Dynasty…

And the early Christian communities always waiting for the second coming of Christ; a day on which Rome would finally be defeated and Jesus would reign triumphant over all of creation…

Neither expectant group of people "getting" what they had been waiting for, but rather the presence of a God who would come in ways no one would ever expect a God to come… all for the sake of overturning, subverting, burning away, breaking open systems and hearts long held in bondage by fear, greed, shame, cynicism, despair, violence, acquiescence, and oh, did I say fear? … All for the sake of making an opening in which love might take root, and grow and blossom forth…

Who would have ever expected a God to come as a refining fire, a ravening lion, a mother hen, a small green shoot, a suffering servant, a potter with hands and heart by which to shape a world, a people, a son, a daughter, all of them beloved?

Would have ever expected a God to come as a little baby born in a Podunk little town at the edge of an empire to two people with no standing what-so-ever among the religious and political elite? Would have ever expected a God to be most fully and completely made known in an act of suffering accompanying love? +

**If we would know anything from our Holy Scriptures it is this… the God we profess and confess never comes as we would expect. But comes in hidden ways… backdoor ways… ways that take us by surprise and shake our preconceived notions… ways that kill our small wizened ways of being in the world and raise us from the dead…**

Like the image of Roy Nathanson coming out onto his second-floor porch at five o'clock every afternoon in the middle of a pandemic in the middle of Brooklyn to play his alto sax… that image being for me this year a sign of the very thing for which I am most fervently waiting… that is, the presence of God in the death-filled darkness of these days…

And reminding me that whenever we are looking for the presence of God in our midst, this will be a sign unto us… Our hearts will break open… Our hearts so constricted in fear and cynicism and despair, and oh, did I day fear, will break open…

While we are waiting for God's kingdom come to come in its fullness, this is how we will know God is already among us and with us… Look, this will be a sign unto you…

You will find him wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger…

You will find him on a second-floor porch playing an alto sax…

You will find her in an intensive care unit in a hospital speaking a word of accompanying love to someone whose loved ones are not allowed in…

You will see her shine over the Bagaduce River at 4:30 in the morning on the first Sunday in Advent, round and full as Mother Mary…

You will see her in a small bag of tulip bulbs which a friend brings to your door along with a note that says, "The soil is still warm enough to plant, so put them in the ground now, trusting that by the time they blossom, Covid will be over"….

And with each of these "seeings" and "hearings" your heart will break open, opening the possibility that from that broken place love might take root, and grow and blossom forth…

If the **substance** of our Advent waiting is the presence of the one who comes to break our hearts open by love, through love, for the sake of love, then the **nature** of this waiting might be simply be called "expectant"…

"Keep awake," Mark says in our Gospel text for this morning, "for you do not know when the time will come… Keep awake."

Look… if the presence of the God made known in our Holy Scriptures comes in ways we would least expect, then the whole world is game… the whole world is a possible portal for the in-breaking of God's presence… God's kingdom… So being **expectant** is the **nature** of our waiting…

The truth is though, I know there are some among us for whom the possibility of our "Advent waiting" being "expectant" is nigh unto impossible. I know this is true, because every other day, every other hour, this is true for me too… Sometimes mustering the capacity for being "expectant" seems beyond our ability, so pointless and ludicrous does the waiting seem to be…

Which is why this year I'm going to hold before my eyes the image of Roy Nathanson coming out onto his second-floor porch in Brooklyn at five o'clock every afternoon in the middle of a pandemic to play music… And along with Roy, the image of the whole host of neighborhood angels who joined him in his music-making with everything from banjos to congas… That's the image I'm going to hold before my eyes…

Because if I look through this image I may be able to remember that the possibility of Roy Nathanson and his neighbors incarnating the presence of God is the whole point of the Christian story… the whole unbelievable crazy point of the story… The whole unbelievable crazy notion that the God of the cosmos; the Sacred Presence beyond our comprehension and understanding, is Emmanuel God with us… carried in the ordinary stuff of this human life… in water and word, in bread and wine, in the extension of care one person to another, in all acts of kindness, in all acts of justice-making, in the sound of an alto sax playing from a second-floor porch in Brooklyn in the terrifying throes of a pandemic…

All of these gestures and movements and expressions of love being signs of the God who even now, as we wait for God to come, is waiting for us to notice that God is already here, proclaiming in ways we would never expect, "I love you, I forgive you, supper is ready."

Perhaps this is the most hopeful good news of Advent… The good news that even when our waiting for God to come is less than expectant, God is waiting for us to notice that God is already here… Look, this will be a sign unto us… Our hearts will break open, and by the power of love we will become signs for others, just like Roy…