

IN THE MEANTIME

“Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!” There must have been a great deal of anguish behind that prayer of the prophet Isaiah. That’s not just pleading with or begging God to come down and save; it’s almost a demand! Get down here now, God!

Such lamenting and crying out has been going on in this world for many years—probably since the beginning of human civilization. Maybe you’ve even expressed similar feelings to the Lord yourself. “Are you there, God? Where are you? We need you! Come down from heaven immediately and intervene for us! Enough is enough!

That cry was heard in places like Texas, Florida, the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico after being hit by major hurricanes. Laments from God come after tragedies of violence like the murders and injuries a terrorist caused to bicyclists in New York a few weeks ago; the mass shootings that killed and wounded so many people in Las Vegas; the deadly gun attack in a San Antonio, Texas church that happened not long ago, and the all too familiar school shootings we seem to hear about every few months on the news.

Pain, sorrow, sickness, death and destruction are so commonplace in our broken, fallen world, they hardly even surprise us anymore. But they do disturb us and cause us anguish, so we shout to the heavens, “God, Enough is enough!” Or, as a homicide detective prayed one time when he entered a crime scene of horrific and unimaginable carnage, “Lord Jesus, now would be a good time to come back.”

Yes it would, Lord Jesus. We’re waiting for you here. What’s keeping you?

The season of Advent which we just entered into is the church’s time, and it’s our time, to reflect on God’s coming. That’s what the word “Advent” means: coming.

Our gospel reading from Mark today tells us that there will be fireworks when Jesus the Christ returns to us. “. . . the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in

clouds with great power and glory.”

So, according to the Scriptures and Jesus himself, the incarnate God whose birth in Bethlehem we’re going to celebrate will return one day with power and magnificence to usher in the reign of God, make a new heaven and a new earth, and gather God’s people from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

Notice how I said, “return one day, meaning in the future.” When exactly will that be? We don’t know? How long from now? Your guess is as good as mine. It could be tomorrow. Or it could be hundreds or even thousands of years in the future. Or Jesus could return for us at the time of our deaths. The point is, not even Jesus himself knows when God is going to give him the go-ahead and say, “It’s time.” Only God the Father knows the date of Jesus’ return, and anyone else who claims to know when it’s going to happen is just blowing smoke.

So please, sisters and brothers in Christ, don’t send any money to the charlatans who claim to have inside knowledge of Jesus’ return, because they’re false prophets. As far as Christ’s second coming is concerned, Paul Simon got it right when he sang, “The information’s unavailable to the mortal man.”

Here we wait. And wonder. And watch. And yearn. And pray. And live our lives hoping that Christ is coming back soon, but living as if it’s never going to happen. This period of time we’re living in now is what I call the “in-between” time. It’s the time between the two comings, the two advents, of Christ our Savior. Which raises the question, what do we do in the meantime, during this in-between period of waiting, as we wonder and watch and yearn and pray and hope for Christ to come again? How do we handle this lag time, especially when things here on earth seem to be falling apart all around us, our hearts cry out for Jesus’ return and we wonder what the delay is?

I think it’s helpful to keep in mind that God’s people have spent the great majority of their existence waiting in the time in between God’s appearances. It seems the Lord doesn’t mind making us wait. And the Lord often doesn’t work in a clear, linear fashion. Rarely does God go from Point A to Point B. No matter how much we want God to act immediately and we plead with God to do something now, God tends to operate in a less direct, more roundabout, not at all immediate manner. And the only thing we can really do is wait.

That seems to be God’s M. O. when it comes to God acting on behalf of God’s people. Think about it. The Lord promised Abram and Sarai that they would have descendants as numerous as the stars, but first they were told to leave their home and head to a new land, and they ended up wandering and dealing with many trials and struggles before Isaac was finally born.

Another patriarch of the Israelites, Jacob, spent a great deal of time wrestling with wife problems and conflicts about his birthright before he found himself wrestling with an angel and being renamed Israel.

Joseph of many-colored coat fame was pounced on by his brothers, sold into slavery and unjustly imprisoned before he came to power in Egypt and was reunited with his family.

The Israelites had been brutalized, overworked slaves in Egypt for between 250 and 400 years, until finally God responded to the cries of God's people and delivered them from Egypt. And then they were made to wander around in the wilderness for forty more years before God gave them the Promised Land.

The nation of Israel was conquered, cast into exile and suffered for seventy years before Babylon was overthrown and the temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem.

Do you see the pattern? There was a lot more in-between waiting time than speedy action by God. The Israelites spent much more time waiting around for God to do something than God spent tearing open the heavens and coming down to do something.

So, when it comes to God's activity in the world, much patience and stamina are called for, like Simeon and Anna had while spending most of their lives waiting, praying and worshipping in the temple week after week, in hopes that God would finally act and send the Messiah. Eventually God did. But in the meantime, Simeon and Anna grew old and feeble in the in-between period of God making the promise to send a Messiah and God fulfilling that promise.

It's no wonder then that Simeon joyously prayed when he greeted the Christ-child in the temple, "Now [finally!] Lord, let your servant go in peace according to your word, for at last my eyes have seen your salvation which you prepared for all the world to see."

What we can learn from this biblical pattern of delay and waiting is, first and foremost, make no mistake, God will act. Delay doesn't mean God isn't at work, asleep or uncaring. God will take action, and we can bet the farm on it; but it will happen in God's own good time and in God's own all-knowing way.

Jesus meant it in Mark 13 when he told his followers that only God the Father knows when he will return. But we can rest assured that, no matter how desperate the circumstances seem, God will act and God will prevail sometime in the future. In that sense, all those waiting, wondering yearning people we read about in the Bible are important examples of to us of how we should put our trust in the Lord and remain faithful over the long haul as we watch and wait for God to act.

And we can cultivate a deeper trust in God by immersing ourselves in those biblical examples of hardship, patience, trust and deliverance, and by surrounding ourselves with other people of faith who are waiting right along with us for God to act, so that together we can encourage one another as we wait with assurance and believe in our hearts that God will take action one day.

The second thing we can learn “in the meantime,” while we’re waiting for God to do something, is to wait actively. You see, waiting for God to act doesn’t mean waiting passively and lifelessly. Like the man in Jesus’ parable who left home and put his slaves in charge, each of them with their own work and orders, Jesus has left us with jobs to do, orders to follow, and a commission of baptizing and making disciples of all the nations to fulfill. The time in-between Jesus’ two advents isn’t meant to be idle time. There’s no dawdling for Jesus’ disciples because we have too much work to do!

Our hope and yearning and faith in Christ’s ultimate return in the future compels us to live as God’s co-workers now. Our job is to envision the world as God would have it and commit our lives, in small and great ways, to bringing that vision closer to reality. Until Christ returns for us at last, it seems that God’s kingdom will come incrementally, little by little, day by day, helped along with each act of loving kindness we perform as we feed the hungry, give a cup of water to those who thirst, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned.

None of those deeds are revolutionary or earth-shaking in and of themselves, of course; but over a lifetime such acts add up and multiply just like the five loaves of bread and two fish that fed five thousand people did, to inspire others and ultimately transform the world, bit by bit, into the kind of world God intends.

There’s an old joke I heard once, where one of the doorkeepers at the Vatican enters the Pope’s chamber and says, “You holiness, Christ has returned!” And the Pope replies, “Oh no! Go out and tell everyone to act busy!”

Advent is the season in the Christian calendar when the church is reminded, not to act busy doing shallow, insignificant deeds, but to shake off its complacency, reclaim a sense of urgency and take action to serve the Lord as it awaits his return. The season of Advent is the time to remember once again that we’re a part of God’s larger story—a story much greater than ourselves—and we have a role to play in helping to usher in the kingdom of heaven.

A United Methodist minister, the Rev. Sue Hauptert-Johnson, told a story about the time she planned to take her four-year-old niece, Sarah, to the beach one weekend. She called her the Monday before their trip and asked, “Are you

ready to go to the beach?” A half-hour later Rev. Hauptert-Johnson’s sister called and wanted to know what she had said to Sarah.

“Why are you asking?”

Her sister replied, “Well, she’s sitting at the end of the driveway with a packed suitcase, waiting for you!”

That’s such a wonderful illustration of the kind of urgent, expectant waiting Jesus called for from his followers: with our suitcases packed and standing at the end of our driveway with our eyes peeled, eagerly looking for our Lord to arrive at any moment to pick us up and take us to the beach, even if the weekend isn’t here yet.

So here we are, my friends, entering another Advent season. We’ve already been waiting a very long time for Christ to come back to us—much too long, if you ask me. But then again, no one asked me. Especially God. And why should God ask me what I think about God’s divine timetable? God works according to God’s own mysterious, enigmatic timetable, and no one, including me, is privy to the details.

God’s plans are God’s plans, and God’s alone. All we can do is wait and wonder and pray and hope and yearn for that glorious day to arrive soon, so that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth, and Christ will return in glory to rule over it.

But in the meantime, my sincere prayer is that this Advent season will be a blessing to you all, and your Advent activities may be fruitful and fill your hearts with faith, expectation, confidence and hope. Because despite evidence that seems to contradict it, God is in control and God’s story is still unfolding; and the end of that story is already written and can be summed up by the ancient proclamation of the Christian church known as the Mystery of Faith: “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.”

May that magnificent day arrive soon. Thanks be to God. Amen.