

Advent 1, The House of Bread...Waiting: leavening
Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

Here we are, once again, entering into the time of Advent. In liturgical time, it's the first day of the new year. And every year as we again begin to cycle through the seasons, we begin with the end.

Advent is a season of waiting. In the Christian narrative, we're waiting with Mary and Joseph for Jesus to be born. So there's anticipation for something new, something unknown, something long-awaited. And even though the story is familiar—we know the story of Mary and Joseph and Jesus well—even so, we're eager to once again join Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, the City of Bread, and sing our joy with the angels and shepherds when Jesus is finally born. The baby Jesus, year after year, promises a new beginning.

But the thing with Advent is that it begins with the end. The beginning of this liturgical year isn't unknown, or empty. We begin Advent remembering the end of the story. As we wait for Jesus to be born, we remember the end. It is the end of the story that *leavens* the whole loaf, the whole story. The end of the story is the leavening in each season. It is this leavening that is at work in us, as individuals, and as communities.

The prophet Isaiah was waiting, and the future he's waiting for is beautiful! "In days to come the mountain of YHWH's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it." It's a compelling image—it takes little imagination to see it in our mind's eye. But what's most remarkable is that Isaiah is speaking these words when Jerusalem is a lowly, forgotten place, a place under foreign occupation, buried by the domination of violence and oppression. There is little evidence that G-D is anywhere near. It is into this impossibly low, defeated, and dead place that Isaiah speaks. And his words tell the future that is coming, the end they can expect:

“The nations shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of YHWH!”

Isaiah was in a time of waiting. And in his words we hear and see the leavening that is at work. It is the leavening of hope and trust, a leavening that feeds his imagination and vision. The leavening that was rising within him couldn't and wouldn't be limited by what others said was possible. His leavening was being fed and tended by the Spirit of God, the Living God. The Spirit of God has been feeding this leavening since before time. It's an ancient sourdough! And the leavening within Isaiah kept bubbling and growing, not confined or contained by the circumstances of his people. Isaiah could see the reality that this leavening was working to produce. Leavening does its work in the time of waiting, in the time in-between—in between what is and what will be. And Isaiah was an active participant as the leaven of G-D's life and aliveness gurgled and bubbled. The end that Isaiah tells us about is beautiful. It draws us in with its warmth and hospitality.

In contrast, the end that Matthew describes is disturbing, off-putting. It sounds harsh and foreboding: “But about that day and hour no one knows.” Matthew recalls Noah, reminding us of all the people and creatures killed in the flood...while Noah and his family were safe in the ark. Rather than inviting, his words sound a warning as he describes scenes where one person will be *taken*, and the other *left*. Having just heard the story of Noah, we initially imagine one person *taken* into the ark and the other *left* to be swept away by violence and death...one person saved... while the other perishes.

What kind of an end is this? Where is its invitation? What kind of leaven is Jesus feeding and tending?

Now is a good time to remember that one of the things we love about Jesus (and maybe one of the things we find annoying!) is that we have to pay close attention to what he's saying. There are the words he says...and then there's the meaning that we only hear when we listen closely and deeply.

Jesus is using apocalyptic vocabulary. He was living in a time when apocalyptic voices were crying out from every direction. Their only hope was that G-D would break open the heavens and come to earth, bringing an end to history and to the world as it was known. That was their leavening. That was what kept them going while they endured the hardship of living under occupation, bent low in systems of oppression and injustice. Their circumstances were not so different from what many in this country experience. (Something unfamiliar to those of us who are privileged.) Voices of the apocalypse heralded the day when G-D would come with shock and awe and judge their oppressors and occupiers. G-D would come and make it right, and essential to making it right was punishing the bad guys and saving the good guys.

We recognize this leavening. This kind of thinking is alive and well in our time...in how our nation's legal system works...and in our churches and theologies—we want good guys to win and bad guys to suffer consequences. We want wrong to be defeated. And we assume G-D is on the side of the good guys (us, of course!).

So here is Jesus using apocalyptic language. But what Matthew's listeners and what we know is the ending of the Jesus story. So we know to listen to his words, not through the lens of apocalyptic of the day, but through the lens of the end of the Jesus story. As Matthew is telling this story, Jesus is just days away from dying. And because we know the story, we know that he will be swept away in a flood of violence. Now we can begin to hear the deeper meaning in Jesus' words. Like the people in Noah's time, Jesus too would be

swept away in a flood, a flood of human violence. God didn't require Jesus to be killed—human beings demanded that Jesus die. In the same way, God didn't require people to be killed in a flood—they died as a result of their own violence, a flood of human violence. We are, all of us, vulnerable to the violence of our world.

But we aren't at the end of the story yet. The end of the story is that even though Jesus was taken, swept away in a flood of violence, even though he died, Jesus is alive. The end of the story isn't violence. The end of the story isn't death. The end of the story isn't G-D coming down with a heavenly army and doing battle with the nations. The end of the story is G-D coming to earth as a baby, a human being. The end of the story is G-D being crucified on a cross. The end of the story is resurrection, life, aliveness! The tomb is the ark, one and the same. It doesn't matter whether we are taken or left, we are always being gathered into G-D's love and mercy, G-D's grace and forgiveness. Whether we are taken or left, we are always being breathed and gathered into the leavening of G-D's aliveness and love and mercy. (*The word taken = forgiven.*)

But we have to stay awake and pay attention, Jesus says. If we fall asleep, we'll fail to feed and tend the leavening of G-D's Spirit within us and within our communities. We know we're awake when we are seeing and imagining possibilities of healing and wholeness. We know G-D's leavening is growing and rising within us when, instead of impossible circumstances, instead of oppression and death, we imagine reconciliation, we discover forgiveness, we see life and aliveness.

One of the Advent voices of our time, a voice that was leavened by G-D's Spirit of aliveness is the voice of Martin Luther King Jr. He too began at the end:

I have a dream....

I have a dream that one day...the [children] of former slaves and the [children] of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood....

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character....
I have a *dream* today!¹

So once again, as we enter into the time of Advent, we are reminded to look at the world around us. We begin by looking at the world, seeing it with G-D's end in mind. We don't have to look long or hard to see that King's dream has not been realized—the African American community is still living under the occupation of white supremacy. Justice is *not* a reality of all G-D's children. Isaiah's vision has not been fulfilled—nations are still raising their swords in war. And creatures and creation continue to be swept away in the flood of human violence, some are taken, others left.

But this is the season of Advent. And the leavening of God's aliveness—of hope and new life—G-D's leavening is at work in the world...and in us. And so we wait. As we begin this season of Advent, we wait with our eyes fixed on the end. We wait, our spirits fed and tended by the Spirit of G-D. We wait while the leavening of aliveness, the leavening of resurrection and healing and reconciliation bubbles and grows and rises within us, within our communities, until it is time, once again, for G-D to be born...here.

¹ <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>