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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

December 10, 2023

Year B, Advent 2, Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

When I was a little boy, we had in our living room a magnificent stereo system. This was before the sleek black plastic things that started to take over in the 1990's, or the wireless speakers we just connect phones to today. I wrote about this stereo system one time in a News and Notes article. It occupied a whole wooden cabinet, and it had many different components, each with its own shelf. There was a record turntable and a tape player and, by the time I was about ten, a CD player unit. And there was the heart of the system, the main console, about *this* big, with a main power switch, several fascinating dials, lights, and flickering needles, and a wonderfully big volume knob that filled my whole hand.

But my favorite part of the system wasn't in the cabinet at all. It was the set of two big, heavy, wooden speakers placed on opposite sides of the room, connected to the main console by thick lengths of speaker wire. Those speakers had some majesty: they were about three feet tall, and they weren't going anywhere. On the front of each one was a small label with the name of the company that made the speakers: *Advent*.

Now, I was fortunate enough to attend an Episcopal church with my family. And so I knew the word Advent. Along with those speakers, it meant purple candles against a dark green wreath; special prayers at the dinner table; and the constant sense that something special was just around the corner.

And it also meant music: a wide variety of holiday music, from sacred to secular. Some of it was sublime and some of it was terribly cheesy: the beautiful carols of the Cambridge Singers mixed with the forgettable tunes of the John Denver Christmas album and even a compilation album I think we'd gotten from a Burger King promotion. For me as a child swept up in the excitement of the season it was all magical. In fact, it was never really Advent for me until the first few bars of the Mannheim Steamroller Christmas CD started coming out of those great big Advent speakers.

There was something else about those speakers. When you stood next to them, and the power was on, but the music hadn't started yet, you could feel something. It wasn't exactly a hum, because you didn't hear it with your ears. It was a vibration, a charge, a power that you felt with your whole body. As you turned that wonderful big volume knob, you could feel the satisfying analog rush of electricity flowing through circuits. And then ... the music began.

That feeling of humming, of power, of an electric charge—that's an Advent feeling. *Something is about to happen*, it says. Something good.

This is the season of anticipation, and there is an electric hum in the air. We do this every year: this strange season where we prepare. What are we preparing for? The simple answer is Christmas, but the readings also keep pointing us to

something beyond just this Christmas—to the unimaginable coming of Christ in glory at the end of time. The scriptures of Advent weave together not just one, but three comings: Christ’s coming *back then*, in the flesh of a human child in Bethlehem; Christ’s coming *in the future*, to bring all creation into the kingdom of God; and Christ’s coming *now*, in our worship and in our daily life, wherever we have eyes to see him. Like that hum of anticipation, Christ’s mysterious presence is everywhere in this holy season—just beyond the reach of our senses, yet closer to us than we can imagine.

In the reading we just heard from the book of Isaiah, Israel has been in captivity in Babylonia for almost fifty years. But the armies of Cyrus the Persian king are sweeping across the Middle East, and they’re almost to the borders of Babylon. The prophet can feel his own electric charge in the air around him. Prepare the way of the LORD, he cries. God is about to act: Israel is about to go home. The valleys will be lifted up. The mountains will be made low. And Israel will walk right across the desert on God’s highway, straight back to the promised land. Get ready, he cries, get ready.

*Something is about to happen.*

Just as Second Isaiah foretold, Israel did make it back to the promised land. But it wasn’t all a happy ending. In the centuries that followed, the Jewish people were subjugated by one empire after another. First the Persians, who had first set them free. Then Greece. Egypt. Syria. And finally, Rome. By the time of Jesus, Israel had been enslaved again for most of the past five hundred years. But in today’s reading from Mark’s gospel, a new prophet called John is again able to perceive that God is about to act. The Messiah is coming—someone who will make sense

of this doomed situation, someone who will liberate the people of Israel, someone whose sandals John isn't even worthy to untie. What kind of Messiah will this be? Who can say?

*But something is about to happen.*

Isaiah and John the Baptist each lived in a time of discouragement and struggle. Each felt the hum of anticipation, the radical and counterintuitive hope that God was at work despite all appearances. And importantly, neither one of them had all the answers of just how God was planning to do this. Advent isn't about being in control: it's about trusting that *God* is in control.

Today we look at a world wracked by war and crisis and we too are longing and crying out for God to act. St. Paul writes in the letter to the Romans that the whole creation is *groaning*, groaning like a woman in labor pains, longing for the day when God will set the universe free from all suffering, all sorrow, all evil. In the meantime we are waiting, but not a passive kind of waiting, the way we wait in the dentist's office, flipping through an old magazine. Our waiting in Christ is active, an urgent longing. In the reading we heard today from 2 Peter, the writer urges his people to *strive* while they are waiting. And we are striving, as we work to be our Lord's hands and feet in the world. We are striving when we open the doors of Farlander Hall to our guests for a hot breakfast each Sunday. We are striving when we give our time and energy and resources and money to help those who are suffering around the world. We are striving when we care for one another in the everyday moments of our lives.

And we are striving, week after week, when we come together around this altar and share in the presence of our Lord, the same one who is the first fruits of our own redemption, the guarantee of God's promise to us that our groaning does not go unheard, that our suffering does not go unredeemed, that the people of Gaza and Israel and Ukraine and Russia and our neighbors in need and our own beloved are all known by name and held in the palm of God's hand.

In this time of our exile, the words of the prophets are calling to us. Even in the midst of all our world's brokenness, there is an electric hum in the air. Can you feel it?

*Something is about to happen.*

We don't know when. We have been waiting. For millennia, for eons, the whole creation has been waiting, and it sometimes seems as if that day will never come. But the day of the LORD *will* come, the day when heaven and earth are gathered into one, when the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Come, Lord Jesus.