



*Proceeding as Way Opens*  
November 29, 2020: The Fourth Sunday of Advent  
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*Oh Lord: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

The Prophet Isaiah nails it for us this morning, as he addresses God directly, on behalf of the Israelites: “O that you would tear open up the heavens and come down!” We sure would like that, too. It would solve a lot of problems, I think. Problems like the pandemic and what to leave open and what to shut down. Problems like vaccine distribution. Problems like essential worker burn out, and parental exhaustion. Problems like persistent inequality, hunger, homelessness, climate change. Problems like ineffective government.

The Israelites’ problems were somewhat different, and more dire.

Our passage from Isaiah was written down sometime between the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586BCE and the rebuilding of the Temple in 515BCE. It is a part of the Israelites’ communal lament that “expresses pain seeking understanding.” (Feasting on the Word, Vol B I, p. 3, William P. Brown) To quote a bit of Isaiah later in the same passage, “Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation...all our pleasant places have become ruins. After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord? Will you keep silent, and punish us severely?” (Isaiah 64.10-12)

The Israelites were in an in-between time—between destruction and renewal—waiting for God to act.

During the season of Advent, we, too, are in an existential and liturgical in-between time. In Advent we begin a new Church year by renewing our awareness of, and participation in, God’s reign of love and justice. We believe this reign was *inaugurated* in a special way 2000 years ago or so, in the birth of Jesus, the Incarnation, Emmanuel, God with us: The First Coming. In Advent, we also look ahead to the *consummation* of God’s reign of love and justice in a Second Coming of Jesus, who will set everything straight, and make everything right, as in last week’s Parable of the Last Judgment.

And so, we stand between the inauguration and consummation, the already and the not yet, the birth of the Messiah, and the return of the Messiah. And it’s uncomfortable: “O, we want You to tear open the skies and come down!”

Jesus speaks directly to this in-between time in the Gospel lesson today. He speaks to us from the midst of a passage in the Gospel of Mark that is called the “Little Apocalypse.” Apocalypse means “unveiling.” For his disciples, for the Gospel’s first readers, and for us, Jesus is unveiling what the beginning of the future looks like at the end of time. This kind of speech was popular among marginalized peoples who saw the world in dualistic terms, of good versus evil, which reflected the depth of their oppression. Things were so bad that the world as they knew it had to end soon. It would come with the judgment of their social and political oppressors, and the promise of better times ahead. But Jesus is clear about the uncertainty of the timing. And so perhaps in order to allay distress about the *when*, Jesus emphasizes the *what*: “Only God knows when this will take place. But I tell you what to do in the meantime. And my words will never pass away; I give them to you to hold on to, to treasure, to trust. Keep awake, keep alert, keep awake.”

Perhaps some of you have seen the apocalyptic end-times bumper sticker, “Jesus is coming. Look Busy.” Does this perhaps tongue-in-cheek bumper sticker get at something important? Is looking busy a special kind of alertness? A special way of being awake?

And Isaiah, whose writings Jesus knew from his own study of Torah, also gives us a challenging understanding of waiting and our relationship to God. “God works for those who wait for him.” (64.4c) What does that look like, as we wait for Jesus return?

I recently came across a piece written by a Quaker pastor, writer, and humorist named Philip Gulley. He describes of a kind of waiting called “Proceeding as Way Opens.” As Gully describes it, “So often we try to force our way through life, determined to do this thing or that thing, believing it to be the right path, but uncertain about how best to proceed. In our passion to reach our goal, we sometimes act rashly, giving little thought to the consequences. We don’t wait for the way to open, we seek no guidance, we fail to listen to that of God within us, we don’t consult our conscience, we don’t listen to others, or to our best instincts. Then, because the way doesn’t open up soon enough to suit us, we bulldoze our way through, acting hastily, before all the pieces are in place to ensure a good outcome...Proceeding as way opens is not a call to be passive, but to be patient, to let a situation or circumstance do unfold, to simmer, to season.”

<http://philipgulley.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Quaker-Sayings-5.pdf>

He gives a humorous example of this “Proceeding as Way” opens, of active waiting. With some other men, friends from his small town in Indiana, he is standing in his old farmhouse. There is a terrible water leak bubbling up through the floor of the basement. As Gully describes the scene, he and his friends are getting excited about the possibility of a complex system of sump pumps, back up sump pumps, floor drains, safety valves, exterior drainage systems, discharge pipes, evacuation pits. They all look forward to the use of power tools and lots of electricity. And then Tim the plumber says, “Men, water always takes the path of least resistance. Why don’t we pour four inches of cement on the basement floor, leave a perimeter channel where the floor meets the wall, and the water will flow right into the channel then into the drain? It’s very simple. We’ll let gravity do the work. Because water always takes the path of least resistance.”

And the others agreed, reluctantly. They knew it was the right way to go, because water always takes the path of least resistance. Water is that way—when it meets resistance, it seeks another path, patiently persisting until the way opens. As Gully writes, we all could learn something from water.

<http://philipgulley.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Quaker-Sayings-5.pdf>

In a more serious vein, Gulley describes the patient, active waiting of Rufus Jones, head of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker NGO, in a time of global peril. It was December of 1938, a month after Kristallnacht in Germany, the night of broken glass, after which the Nazis began to transport Jews to the death camps. Jones had somehow arranged a secret meeting with Hitler to negotiate an end to the persecution of Jews. When the press published a story about it the impending meeting, an angry Hitler canceled it.

Jones went to Germany anyway; he stayed in his hotel room and prayed and prayed and pounded the Germany government with phone calls and telegrams. He met with whomever would see him. Jones finally got a meeting with Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Gestapo. Jones reminded him that Quakers had fed millions of starving German children in the aftermath of World War, that world opinion opposed him now, and that history would judge him harshly. If he wanted to redeem himself, the only way would be to release German Jews to the Quakers,



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who would settle them in other countries. Incredibly, Heydrich agreed to release as many Jews as other nations would take. Despite Jones' travel to European and American capitals pleading for help, pernicious anti-Semitism drastically limited his success. In the end, Jones was at least able to arrange for the transport of 10,000 Jewish children to Great Britain. <http://philipgulley.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Quaker-Sayings-5.pdf>

Active waiting, or "Proceeding as Way Opens," presents those moments when we can act. Mostly our opportunities will more closely resemble the basement leak, rather than heroics that save thousands of children from certain death. In the meantime, God works for those who wait, who trust, as Isaiah says. That God is always looking to return, if we allow it.

As we wait for the Second Coming in power and great glory, may we actively wait for the next coming, the next moment when we can do God's will. As the Jewish philosopher William Benjamin once wrote, "Every day, every instant, is the small gate through which Messiah enters."

**Amen.**