

Sermon – December 3, 2023  
“God works for those who wait for him”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Isaiah 64:1-4

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill open hearts, anoint the sharing of these words, and bless your people through them. Jesus, fuel our continuing transformation into your image with these words and lead us out into fruitful labor in your mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Happy New Year! Yes, I did say “Happy New Year!” Today is the first Sunday on the Christian calendar. Welcome to the start of another year in the cyclic, yearly rhythm of the Church. On the Christian calendar, there are three seasons that we are moving into and towards: Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Advent is the anticipation of the coming of Jesus. Christmas is the celebration of the first coming of Jesus. And Epiphany is the celebration of the coming of the world to greet Jesus, recognizing Jesus as a blessing to all the nations of the world. Today is the first Sunday of Advent and as we begin the Advent season, we have lit the candle of hope. We have stepped into the Advent season where we join with those who follow the one God and, in hope, anticipate the coming of God as a deliverer. Advent is not only a time to remember what God has done but to anticipate a future coming of Jesus, this time in power. Now there is no test to see if you can define all of these seasons, and I am certain that many of you can provide better

descriptions of them than I have this morning. The culture we live in has increasingly lost connection to the reason for these seasons and their celebration. We can find items related to the culture's views of Christmas starting to show up even before Halloween. And we will find that for the most part, our U.S. culture ends the Christmas season on Christmas Day. Our culture continues to transform the flow of these seasons from a time to anticipate God acting unexpectedly to deliver us from the cruelest of slavery, our bondage to sin, into something that has little in common with a celebration of God's gift to the nations. The culture seeks to make Christmas into a kind of Thanksgiving with extravagant presents instead of the celebration of the coming of Jesus as a humble child born in a manger. Let me encourage us to seek ways to celebrate these three seasons to their fullest. Let us anticipate the coming of Jesus, both as he came in the past as God in the flesh and will come in the future as Jesus the King with full authority. I hope we will decorate our homes, put up creches, decorate a tree with lights, show wreaths on our homes, and use fully all of the symbols of the season. I pray we will find a Christmas pageant to watch, that we will sing all of the hymns and carols that relate to these seasons, that we will take time to listen to music such as Handel's *Messiah* and hear "Mary did you know" and other contemporary Christmas songs. I hope we will send gifts to our friends and loved ones in celebration of the greatest gift the world has ever been given, a gift humanity received with the birth of the Christ child. So, celebrate Christmas Day when we remember what God has done, entering our world, splitting open the skies, and coming down to be among us, not coming as God came at the Exodus causing the mountains to tremble with smoke and fire, but coming as a humble child born in a manger to a young woman betrothed in marriage. Let me also encourage us to add time to celebrate the season of Epiphany, the arrival of the wise men to worship Jesus. They came to meet a king whose birth the heavens proclaimed. As we seek during this season to remember the arrival of Jesus as a child, let us also anticipate his return in glory as the king when he comes in power with all of his angels. That is the dual nature of Advent, when we seek to remember Jesus' first coming as a baby and look forward to his return as the king of glory. Don't hesitate to sing the songs of the seasons anytime you can, and let them point us always to the reason for the season. Do what helps us honor God and recall what he has done for us by coming in the flesh. Keep celebrating these seasons, going beyond the time the culture allocates to them and instead, celebrate Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany to the fullest.

Let's join with the prophet Isaiah this morning and look at the words he was given by God to guide us as we anticipate the coming of God. First, realize that Isaiah is asking God to "rend the heavens" or to tear them open. Isaiah is asking God to act, to tear open the thin veil that separates heaven from creation. Isaiah is primarily speaking to God's people who are in exile and is sending them a message of hope. We do not have to look far or long into the world today to realize that we also need a message of hope. There are two wars underway in the world; there are countless children being trafficked into slavery; there is great economic stress; and there is much occurring in the lives of those created in God's image that does not honor God and is being advocated for and sought after by the world. We need God to do something. We need God to change our situation. Contrary to the ideas in our culture, humanity is not the solution. Our efforts do not and cannot solve our dilemma. Only if God opens the heavens and acts can we find the help we need. Asking God to rend the heavens is to ask God to do again what He has done in the past.

Isaiah asked not only for God to rend the heavens but to come down. He is asking God to do something for God's people. The people of God have been taken into bondage. We also should have this same cry, asking God to come and do something, so that we might be freed from the cruel bondage we face today, bondage to sin. When we ask God to come down, we are admitting that we need God to act, that He alone can do something about our situation. When we look back at how God has come down in the past, we develop an expectation that God will do again what He has done in the past. We recall God's mighty hand in action against Egypt with the result of His people being freed from cruel bondage there, and we expect to see His mighty hand acting in our own situations today. We look for God to come down and for mountains to tremble and for nations to receive undeniable proof that God acts to free His people, that God has come and will come again.

Yet Isaiah goes on to tell us that God does what we do not expect. We expect fire that consumes and the glory of God present as at Mount Sinai, but instead God comes as a baby, humble, born in a manger to die for us that we might be freed from our sin and be reconciled to God. God does what we cannot imagine. He comes as a child to an unmarried teenager. He comes in our form to breathe our air, to eat with us, to walk with us, to live among us. He is not separated from us by dark clouds or the wall of a tent, but he comes to tabernacle with us, to dwell with us. God becomes a human and is with us. How desperately the world needs God to do

the unexpected. We need our Father to reform us as a potter reforms the precious vessel he has created that breaks under his creative hand. Like the potter who remakes and reforms the vessel, removing the break, so also, we, our world, those created in the image of God, need God to reform us.

Advent is the season when we hope that God will rend the heavens and come and do the unexpected. Advent is the season when we anticipate what we already know God has done, yet we celebrate this season both because we need God to come again and because we anticipate that Jesus will come again in power with his angels. Let us seek to prepare our hearts through our celebrations of the seasons and receive the long-awaited Jesus. Let us also prepare our hearts to receive the unexpected and prepare our hearts to share Jesus with the world so that they may receive Emmanuel, God with us, into their own hearts and be transformed into a vessel made new in Christ. How desperately the world needs the unexpected. How we all need our Father to reform us so that we are enabled to be free from the world of sin and to become the holy vessels He would have us be, the vessels the Father recreated us to be. Prepare our hearts to receive the unexpected, the long-awaited Jesus.

*Pray with me. Father, let us encounter the unexpected presence of the Christ child. Let us not only remember seasons long past when we anticipated the unexpected and received far more than we could imagine, but, Father, come and rend our hearts that we might be transformed into holy vessels filled with Holy Spirit and poured out into the world. Open our eyes, transform our hearts, and guide us. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Expect God to do the unexpected and go with Jesus as the unexpected person in his mission. Amen