

“Are You Waiting for Christmas or Waiting for Christ?”

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

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Once upon a time, there were a people named the Israelites. Almighty God named and claimed them the people of God. God promised to bless, protect and care for them allowing them to become a great nation more numerous than the stars in the sky. They experienced lean years and years of abundance as the numbers of their sheep and goats fluctuated. When needs arose, God met them in God's own timing--so the Israelites developed patience waiting for God to act. Through a series of unfortunate circumstances that began with a famine in their land, they became enslaved to the Pharaoh in Egypt. Their lives became miserable toiling seven days out of seven as they were beaten by harsh, Egyptian taskmasters. God alone sustained them as they grew up in slavery, fell in love, got married, bore children. Concerned with the Israelites' growing numbers in case they planned a rebellion, Pharaoh ordered all their newborns be killed. Puah and Shiprah, two Israelite midwives, subversively defied Pharaoh telling him Israelite newborns were extremely hearty, often nursing by the time the midwives arrived to help with the birth. Versed in affairs of state but not childbirth, Pharaoh bought their story. As they suffered hopelessly under Pharaoh, the Israelites cried to God, “deliver us.” Then they expectantly waited for God to act.

Moses, reluctant leader turned God's envoy, asked Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave. After plagues of locusts, dead cows, river water turned into blood, and the deaths of all Egyptian firstborn males the battle of “Who is really in charge” between Pharaoh and God was over. Utterly defeated, Pharaoh told the Israelites to go. When Pharaoh realized the implications of zero slaves, he and his army went charging after them. God helped Moses hold back the Red Sea with a staff while the Israelites safely crossed over. The Egyptian army drowned when the waters were no longer held back. The Israelites set their sights on God's Promised Land and began traveling through the wilderness to find it. They wandered for a time, camped out at good locations for a while, became restless and resumed wandering. They did this for forty years. Some people think they wandered that long because Moses and Aaron would not ask

directions, but they were being transformed, transformed from slaves told what to do to making decisions and assuming responsibility for themselves, transformed as they deepened their trust in God.

At long last, the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of Israelites found, conquered and moved into the Promised Land. Like a vine taken out of Egypt and planted elsewhere in fertile soil, they flourished. Equipped by God with skills and intelligence they recognized every breath was a gift from God. God's presence and direct intervention in ways large and small in their lives gave profound meaning to their lives. It was not a perfect life but it was a protected life and the Israelites thrived. Strangely enough, their relationship with God was most trusting as they depended daily on God for food and water in the wilderness. Doubts about God surfaced from time to time but one golden calf incident that ended badly set them straight. Their prayers, like the stories of their ancestors, were handed down one generation to the next. Prayers that showed respect and deference as they praised and gave thanks to God were recorded as well as the brutally honest, whining, complaining, demanding prayers. If they were suffering or feeling hopeless---God heard about it. "Where are you God?" Why don't you do something about our situation? Why don't you come down and make things right? How long, O Lord, how long will we have to wait for you to "give ear," to "stir up your might," to "restore us," to "turn again" and "let your face shine upon us?" When enemies threatened to invade their land they lamented, "Why have you broken down the walls of this vineyard and allowed people to come along and plunder the fruit? We are the vine you have cared for so tenderly." In other words, "How could you do this to us? We are your children!"

Their prayers demonstrated their trust in God, a God big enough to hear their hurt, strong enough to handle their anger. Their ultimate hope, they understood, rested in God's favor and God's willingness to turn from anger and be gracious to them. Remembering the numerous times God intervened on their behalf throughout history they cried out, "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

They expected God to act in their lives yet again.

Our story and the story of the Israelites are similar in ways. We also experience chaos and suffering in our lives, we also are people of God sustained by God alone and we also confess God remains

king over all. Our hope, like their hope, rests not in what we have done, nor in what we can do, but in all that God is.

“Like our ancestors in faith, we and all of humankind stand before God in ‘helplessness and need,’” James Newsome writes. “Not only are we vulnerable to those forces that may destroy our happiness—indeed, our very existence—but there is little or nothing we, when left to ourselves, are capable of doing about our precarious state.” (Texts for Preaching Year B). So we, like the psalmist, utter a primal cry: O God, help! And we expect God to intervene in our lives yet again.

Once upon a time there was a people, part of the Body of Christ, known as members of Fairmont Presbyterian Church. God abundantly equipped them with numerous skills as well as energy, intelligence, imagination and love. They experienced lean years and years of abundance. When needs arose—individually and corporately--God met their needs in God’s own timing, so they developed patience waiting for God to act. They realized they were people living in a land of darkness until God intervened sending a Savior. Through a series of unfortunate circumstances they became enslaved to modern-day “Pharaohs.” Pharaohs that pushed them to work more, spend more, accumulate more. Their lives became miserable. God alone sustained them as they suffered hopelessly under these Pharaohs. They cried out to God, “deliver us, help us.” They lamented, “help my family member struggling with addiction, heal my loved one of disease, help my child find her or his purpose in life. Bring peace to the Middle East. Bring our troops home from Afghanistan & Iraq – for we do not want to send our loved ones into harm’s way!!!! Heal troubled marriages, re-energize those that have become complacent. Reconcile broken relationships. Comfort motherless children. Compassionately embrace those who sorrow. Give peace to my aging parent. Provide shelter, food, employment. Give the working poor a tax break! Help all victims . . . victims of physical, sexual, emotional abuse . . . victims of disaster . . . victims of violence . . . perpetrators of violence. Help our church grow, strengthen our witness, deepen our trust in You.

*“Hear us! Restore us! Save us! Let your face shine upon us!*

And expectantly they wait for God to act.

Expectation is the word for Advent as we wait for the Holy to break into the daily yet again. In what ways can people of faith

“expect” God to act this Advent season? In what ways do you expect God to act this Advent? May it be so for you and for me. Amen.