

The First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia  
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Mark 13:24-37; Isaiah 64:1-12

### *Waiting for Immanuel*

The summer I was 14, my family traveled to England. It was the first time my sister and I had been to Europe. We arrived at the airport, took the train in, and then were taking the Tube, or the metro, to our hotel. We got all our bags on to the platform, and there was a train there, though probably shortly to depart. I thought we could make it, so I got on the metro train. The doors shut, and I saw my family still standing on the platform as I pulled away. This was 2000, long before we all had cell phones, and there's something else that's important for you to know. I grew up in Phoenix, Arizona, a city that really didn't develop until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It's in the desert, where you have some sandy dirt for a few inches on top of a clay-like substance, so until more recently, you really didn't dig into the ground. The city is also very spread out, all of which means, there is no subway system, which is to say, this entire subway thing was as foreign as being in a foreign country to me. I tried to think as I panicked. I looked up at the map of the Tube system, trying to figure out what to do, and I remember seeing some stops marked by white circles outlined in the color of the line, and others with little dashes, and I didn't know what they meant. Did every train stop at all of them, or were some express trains that only stopped at the circles? If so, what if I got off at the next stop, a dash, and my family got on an express that just zoomed by me. I knew where we needed to end up so should I just go there, but would my parents think I would go there on my own, which included changing lines, or would they think I'd get off at the next station?

Maybe the Israelites also got on a train going the wrong way, taking them away from God. Except in the case, the train had left the station a long time ago. It is thought that the book of Isaiah is actually comprised of three different sections from three different time periods. The first is from before the Babylonian exile, the second is set in exile, and the third section after they return to Israel. Today's reading is from the third section, it's the communal lament of a people who return home after 50 years in exile in a foreign land only to find that home in ruins. They are angry with God, and feel like God has abandoned them, and in one sense, you can't blame them. But I find the whole order they put things in interesting. Some of you may have seen the cookie challenge on social media this year, a "challenge" if you will where a parent sits a toddler or dog down, puts a treat in front of them, and then tells them not to eat it while they leave the room. The videos are cute, some eat it, some actually wait; my cousin's daughter took a nibble and then blamed the cat when her dad came back. The Israelites are basically saying that God set them up with a life size cookie challenge – God, you walked out of the room, and that caused us to sin. God does not set us up with cookie challenges, offering temptation and punishing us if we fail. We do that all on our own, yet in this lament, you see the Israelites wanting to blame God for what has happened – you got angry God so we sinned, because you hid yourself we transgressed. They are looking for explanations as to why their reality is so challenging and they want to blame God, but it's far from being that simple.

Several times over the last few weeks I've been reading or listening to things and come across references to the "Old Testament God." You may know is one of my pet peeves, because of how short sighted that stereotype truly is, and at first glance, passages like this one today play into the whole angry, punishing God (even though we don't actually hear any anger from God in this passage). The Israelites follow the same pattern time and time again throughout the Hebrew Scriptures – worship God, see God's blessing in our lives, life is good and they forget about God, they stray and start doing more and more sinful things, things fall apart, and they run back to God asking why this has happened and for God to save them, and time and time again, God forgives the Israelites, and gives them another chance, though often they do have to deal with the consequences of whatever they have done. I so often think we are just like the Israelites, who often stray from God, but the truth is that God forgives us, too.

As I mentioned above, I personally don't believe that God punishes us, but I fully believe that God has allowed us to face the consequences of our actions, and yes, that also includes the consequences of our ancestors' actions. I don't believe in punishment that carries to the fourth or fifth or tenth generation, but we all know that consequences last that long. What had led to the destruction of Jerusalem that the Israelites returned home from exile to find? Lots of things, but you might say it went back a few hundred years, that it started when the Israelites demanded God let them have a monarch. God had suggested this wasn't such a good idea, they said they didn't care, others groups had monarchs, and they wanted an earthly ruler too. Over time, some kings had been good, but many had been corrupt and terrible, and decisions made by those bad monarchs led to consequences for the entire people, sometimes terrible consequences. In where we find ourselves in 2020, we too are dealing with the consequences of our own actions, and the actions of our ancestors. We are still dealing with the consequences of some of our ancestors' decision to enslave black people in this country, some of them using the Christian faith to justify it, and their refusal to see all humans as beloved children of God. We are dealing with the consequences of not caring for our earth and exploiting it for generations, for interpreting Genesis as a command to dominate the earth instead of stewarding the earth, and while natural disasters happen no matter what, climate change is making them happen more frequently and with far greater strength and consequences, often impacting those who are the most vulnerable. Another consequence of climate change is likely going to be an increase in the frequency of pandemics. And while yes, there are countless stories of kindness and sacrifice and compassion and love during this pandemic, we are also dealing with the consequences of a society that teaches us to value the individual, and the individual family unit over the community, a mindset that tells us that I don't have to wear a mask to protect my neighbor if I don't want to and don't have to alter my social life too much if it's inconvenient to me, both of which are part of what's led to us never really getting control of the virus in this country. I know that may sound harsh, but the well-being of **all** people is what Jesus preaches and teaches, and is what God desires, and for the many of you who have done everything asked during this pandemic but are still facing the consequences of other's actions, you know how what each of us do impacts others.

I don't mean to sound like Miss doom and gloom here. I do believe in all the pain and mess and brokenness we still kind find hope and even joy. I say all of this to say that when I sat down and read this passage from Isaiah, I was like, "I hear you Isaiah." I hear the pain and confusion, the wanting God to show up and do big things, even the wanting to blame it all on God. One commentator describes this passage as a "cry of pain seeking understanding," and at the end of 2020, I think many of us can resonate. Whether we got on the train going the wrong way or someone else did, some of our very human brothers and sisters and ancestors, we are dealing with the consequences of part of humanity having gone in a different direction than God intended. It is easy to wonder where God is when the world looks like it does. That doesn't mean God has abandoned us though.

So where does this leave us? At the beginning of Advent.

Advent is a season of waiting in the darkness. I ended up getting off the tube at the next station, hoping that if I stood on the platform exactly by the doors I had gotten out of, the next train would indeed stop at that station, and my family would be at the same doors I had been, just on the next train. While I waited, I was anxious as all get out, but indeed, they there were. Our Advent waiting isn't meant to be anxiety-free. Advent is a time we listen to the voices of the prophets, when we face the injustices of the world, so maybe 2020 has been an Advent kind of year. Waiting is a learned discipline, and so, each Advent, we are invited to work on learning how to do it better.

And what is it we are waiting for? Advent is a time when we wait in darkness for the arrival of the Christ-child, Immanuel, God-with-us, God's way of entering into the messiness of life with us. The Israelites in Isaiah wanted God to show up and do big things, to make the mountains quake. I would love for God to show up and fix it all. But what is the story of the incarnation? It is the story of God doing something that would shake the course of human history in the most ordinary of ways. A baby, born on an ordinary night to an ordinary young woman married to an ordinary young man. God chooses to use the ordinary time and time again to do the extraordinary, and God did so by becoming human. God never abandoned the Israelites, and God hasn't abandoned us. God only draws closer to us.

There's no going back. Once I stepped on that train and those doors closed, there wasn't a rewind, a world in which that didn't happen. But I learned a lot that day, from how the Tube works and how to understand the maps, to that it's important to make sure everyone is on the same page before rushing into something. Our future is going to look different than our past, who knows what things will look like as we begin Advent a year from now. However it looks, we know that God will be there with us. And if we invite God in, God will help us to shape it to be a little more just, a little more like how God would have it look, than the world we see today. Amen.