

Mark 13: 24-37

MY WAITING BEGAN SHORTLY AFTER THANKSGIVING WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS CATALOGS. THERE IS NOTHING QUITE AS EXQUISITE, ALMOST PAINFULLY DELICIOUS, AS A CHILD'S WAITING FOR CHRISTMAS. DO YOU REMEMBER THE OLD CHRISTMAS CATALOGS...SEARS, JCPENNEY, MONTGOMERY WARD...THEY WOULD ARRIVE IN THE MAIL FULL OF ALL THE DAZZLING CHRISTMAS GIFT IDEAS. BETWEEN THE CATALOGS, THE MACY'S THANKSGIVING DAY PARADE, AND THE PRACTICING OF THE CHRISTMAS MUSIC FOR OUR ELEMENTARY CHRISTMAS PAGEANT, I HAD BEEN LAUNCHED INTO THE GREAT TIME OF DELICIOUS WAITING.

IN HIS BOOK, *SECRETS IN THE DARK*, FREDERICK BUECHNER REMEMBERS HIS OWN CHILDHOOD WAITING, HOW HIS GRANDPARENTS USED TO SEND HIM AN ADVENT CALENDAR WITH THE LITTLE WINDOWS TO BE OPENED EVERY DAY REVEALING THE PICTURE A TOY, A CANDY CANE, A TEDDY BEAR. HE COULD FEEL THE EXCITEMENT IN THE PIT OF HIS STOMACH AS IT GOT CLOSER AND CLOSER TO DECEMBER 24 AND HE OPENED THE LITTLE DOOR INSIDE THERE WAS A STABLE AND A BABY ASLEEP IN THE STRAW.

BUECHNER WRITES, "I REMEMBERS ON CHRISTMAS MORNING WE WOULD DRIVE INTO NEW YORK CITY, WHERE OUR GRANDPARENTS LIVED, AND ALONG WITH MY FATHER'S TWO BROTHERS AND THEIR FAMILIES WE WOULD START WAITING ALL OVER AGAIN IN THE DIM HALLWAY OF OUR GRANDPARENT'S APARTMENT—UNTIL FINALLY OUR GRANDFATHER APPEARED AND OPENED THE DOOR UNTO UNUTTERABLE MAGIC—A WHOLE ARABIAN NIGHTS' WORTH OF TREASURES WITH THE LIGHTS OF THE TREE GLIMMERING AND CIDER AND GERMAN CHRISTMAS COOKIES. AND SO MANY PRESENTS THEY HAD TO SET THEM OUT ALL AROUND THE WALLS WITH A PILE FOR EACH OF US MARKED WITH OUR NAME. IT WAS WORTH VASTLY MORE THAN ALL THE WEEKS WE HAD SPENT WAITING FOR IT, AND THOUGH I'VE LONG SINCE FORGOTTEN ALMOST EVERY PRESENT I EVER GOT, I REMEMBER THE DAZZLING LIGHT OF IT AND THE PRESENCE OF ALL THOSE PEOPLE I LOVED AND WHO LOVED ME, AND THE FEELING THAT LIFE SIMPLY COULD NEVER GET ANY BETTER THAN THIS, AND THE ALMOST UNBEARABLE EXCITEMENT OF IT.

BUT, BUECHNER REMEMBERS THERE WAS DARKNESS IN THAT ROOM AS WELL. NOT LONG AFTER HIS FATHER COMMITTED SUICIDE, HIS GRANDFATHER DIED OF A BROKEN HEART, AND A FEW YEARS AFTER THAT, HIS FATHER'S YOUNGEST BROTHER COMMITTED SUICIDE TOO.

"THERE WAS NOT CHRISTMAS ENOUGH TO SAVE THE DAY," HE WRITES. THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH CHRIST AND WE CRIED OUT FOR GOD.

AND SO ADVENT BEGINS WITH A CRY FOR HELP. RIGHT IN THE MIDST OF THE BRIGHT LIGHTS AND COLOR, THE EXQUISITE EXCITEMENT, THE WONDERFUL FESTIVITY, THE WORDS OF THE ANCIENT PROPHET, ALMOST LIKE THE RUDE RING OF AN ALARM CLOCK: "O THAT YOU WOULD TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN." "DEAR GOD, HELP ME, PLEASE"—THE BASIC, PRIMAL HUMAN PRAYER, WHICH SOONER OR LATER, EVERY ONE PRAYS.

WE FIND OURSELVES IN AN AWKWARD SPOT HERE THIS MORNING. THE CULTURE AROUND US IS ALREADY IN THE MIDST OF CHRISTMAS PREPARATIONS AND RETAILERS REPORT IT LOOKS LIKE IT WILL BE A VERY HAPPY HOLIDAY INDEED.

THE AWKWARDNESS IS CAUSED BY THE CHURCH'S CENTURIES-OLD WISDOM THAT THE BEST WAY TO PREPARE FOR CHRISTMAS IS TO WAIT IN THE DARKNESS FOR A WHILE AND TO ACKNOWLEDGE OUR NEED AND JOIN THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF WAITING AND TO PRAY THAT MOST HUMAN PRAYER, "DEAR GOD, HELP!"

ADVENT TEXTS AROUND THE WORLD THIS MORNING ARE FROM THE PROPHET ISAIAH, ABOUT A TIME SIX CENTURIES BEFORE THE BIRTH OF JESUS WHEN GOD'S PEOPLE WERE IN A MESS, AN INDESCRIBABLE TRAGEDY, ACTUALLY. THEIR NATION WAS GONE, THEIR PROUD ARMY DEFEATED, THEIR BEAUTIFUL CITY WITH THE MAGNIFICENT TEMPLE, DESTROYED, BURNED TO THE GROUND. AND THEY, THE FORTUNATE SURVIVORS, WERE IN BABYLON, HELD CAPTIVE.

FROM BACK IN RUINED JERUSALEM ONE OF THEM, AN ELEGANT POET, A PROPHET, WROTE, "O THAT YOU WOULD TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN." O THAT YOU WOULD SHOW THE BABYLONIANS WHO'S IN CHARGE. O THAT YOU WOULD COME AND PUT THINGS RIGHT AGAIN, FIX WHAT'S WRONG. O THAT YOU WOULD COME WITH JUSTICE, PUNISH THE

WICKED, AND REWARD THE RIGHTEOUS. O THAT YOU WOULD GET ME OUT OF THIS MESS. O THAT YOU WOULD HELP ME.

IN THE TREASURED BOOK, *CHILDREN'S LETTERS TO GOD*, ONE CHILD WRITES: "DEAR GOD, ARE YOU REAL? SOME PEOPLE DON'T BELIEVE IT. IF YOU ARE REAL, YOU BETTER DO SOMETHING QUICK. LOVE, HARRIET ANN.

THAT'S THE OLDEST PRAYER IN HUMAN HISTORY. "IF YOU ARE REAL, DEAR GOD, DO SOMETHING QUICK."

O THAT YOU WOULD TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN. IT'S THE PRAYER I WHISPER IN MY HEART EVERY MORNING WHEN I HEAR OF MORE ASTROCITIES OF INNOCENT CHILDREN BEING KILLED IN WARS AROUND THE WORLD. I UTTER THAT PRAYER WHEN I BECOME DISCOURAGED THAT PEACE AND COMPASSION SEEM SO WEAK, SO PITIFUL IN THE FACE OF THE REALITIES OF THIS WORLD—GREED AND SELFISHNESS AND VIOLENCE. AND, AS IS THE CASE WITH EACH ONE OF US, I PRAY THAT PRAYER ON BEHALF OF LOVED ONES, DEAR FRIENDS, PARISHIONERS, THOSE STRUGGLING WITH CHALLENGE OR ILLNESS. O THAT YOU WOULD HELP ALL OF THEM, DEAR GOD. O THAT YOU WOULD HELP ME.

IT IS THE DEEPEST YEARNING OF THE HUMAN HEART: THE LONGING, THE WANTING, THE NEEDING, THE WAITING WITH WHICH EVERY ONE OF US IS INTIMATELY FAMILIAR.

IN AN ADVENT MEDITATION, JOHN STENDAHL ASKS, "WHY AGAIN THESE CANDLES AND THIS RITUALIZED LONGING. AFTER ALL THIS TIME UNDER AN UNBROKEN FIRMAMENT GOD HAS NOT COME DOWN, WOULD NOT SIMPLE RESIGNATION BE MORE HONEST?"

WE LIGHT THE ADVENT CANDLES AND GIVE VOICE TO OUR LONGING AND SAY, "O THAT YOU WOULD TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN" AND PLEAD "DEAR GOD, HELP ME," BECAUSE SOMEWHERE DEEP IN YOUR HEART AND MINE WE KNOW THAT GOD HAS ANSWERED THAT PRAYER, THAT GOD DOES ANSWER PRAYER. SOMEWHERE DEEP IN YOUR HEART AND MINE THERE IS NOT JUST LONGING BUT FAITH THAT IN THE BIRTH OF A CHILD IN BETHLEHEM LONG AGO, GOD DID COME DOWN; THAT OVER A BAPTISM ONE DAY IN THE JORDAN RIVER, GOD DID TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS; AND THAT IN A BRIEF MOMENT IN TIME

AS HE WALKED THE DUSTY ROADS OF GALILEE AND HEALED THE SICK AND WELCOMED THE OUTCASTS AND RESTORED THE UNCLEAN, AS HE TAUGHT THAT IT IS BETTER TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE AND THAT THE HIGHEST AND BEST ANY OF US CAN EVER DO IS GIVE OUR LOVE AND LIVES AWAY, AND THAT AS HE DIED IN HUMBLE OBEDIENCE, GOD, IN FACT, DID TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN; AND THAT ON THE THIRD DAY, WHEN DEATH COULD NOT CONTAIN JESUS, WHEN THE VERY LOVE AND POWER OF GOD DEFEATED THE POWERS OF SIN AND DEATH, THE POWERS OF VIOLENCE AND INJUSTICE, WHEN THAT CHILD, NOW A MAN, ROSE UP AND WALKED INTO THE LIGHT OF THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK, GOD DEFINITELY, ONCE AND FOR ALL, ANSWERED THAT PRAYER, "HELP ME."

JESUS HIMSELF ONCE WARNED HIS FRIENDS THAT THEY MIGHT POSSIBLY MISS THE COMING OF GOD INTO THE WORLD IF THEY WERE NOT ALERT, AWAKE, AND WATCHFUL THEY MIGHT MISS GOD'S LOVE, GOD'S REDEEMING, HEALING, AND RESTORING GRACE APPEARING IN THE MIDDLE OF LIFE.

JESUS HIMSELF WARNED HIS DISCIPLES THAT HUMAN BEINGS ARE INCLINED TO MISS GOD BY LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACES AND EXPECTING THE WRONG KINDS OF DIVINE INTRUSIONS. NO ONE MUCH NOTICED THE BIRTH AFTER ALL. INFORMED, INTELLIGENT ATTENTION WAS FOCUSED ON THE ROYAL PALACE, NOT A STABLE. SMART MONEY WAS ON THE ROYAL COURT, NOT A HILLSIDE WHERE SOME SHEPHERDS WERE KEEPING THEIR SHEEP.

"STAY AWAKE, BE ALERT, WATCH," JESUS TOLD THEM, TELLS US. FOR GOD COMES, WILL COME, IN UNEXPECTED, QUIET WAYS AND ONLY THE CAREFUL, THE QUIET, THE FAITHFUL WILL SEE.

LOOK AT THE WINDOWS THAT BURN LIKE FIRE WHEN THE SUN SHINES THROUGH THEM, AND THE IMAGE OF CHRIST, AND THE CANDLES....AND THE COMMUNION ELEMENTS...THE SOUNDS THIS MORNING THAT BREAK THE SILENCE, THE MUSIC, OUR OWN VOICES SINGING AND PRAYING.

WHAT IS IT WE ARE ESSENTIALLY DOING IN THIS BUILDING? DEEP BENEATH ALL OF THIS IN OUR INNERMOST HEARTS, I THINK WE ARE WAITING. AND SO WE WAIT, AND SOMETIME IN THE WEEKS OF ADVENT AHEAD, PERHAPS HERE, AS YOU SING A FAVORITE HYMN, OR EAT

BREAD AND DRINK THE CUP, OR PERHAPS IN THE MIDST OF A BUSY DAY, A MEAL WITH FAMILY, OR PERHAPS IN A QUIET MOMENT, AS YOU REMEMBER, AS YOU WAIT, CHRIST WILL COME. SO INSTEAD OF WAITING FOR CHRISTMAS, WE WAIT FOR CHRIST. THANKS BE TO GOD. AMEN.