

Faith Mennonite Church
Nov. 27, 2011 – Advent 1
“Awesome deeds we do not expect”
Joetta Schlabach

The Shape of our Longing
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Yesterday I returned from a week in California. As usually happens, I didn't have a lot of time to mentally prepare for the trip since there were many last-minute things to wrap up on this end before I left. Gerald and I had already made contact with a friend who lives in the area who promised to spend a day showing us the sights of San Francisco, and our son Gabe & his wife Valerie would be our hosts during the second half of our stay, so we didn't feel a need to do a lot of advanced planning. Unknowingly, however, the readings for this first Sunday of Advent, were preparing me.

For several weeks I had been reading the words from Isaiah 64: “oh that the mountains would quake,” and from Mark about a “darkened sky.” None of this happened while we were there, but it is exactly what happened in 1906 when a massive earthquake and subsequent fire devastated San Francisco. As someone who enjoys history almost as much as the present, I spent a bit of time on the internet learning about that earthquake, in between my walks up and down the hilly streets of that beautiful city.

Each year the church sets aside four weeks to observe Advent. This season of Advent, which means “coming” or “arrival” is multivalent: it leads us into a reflection of the profound meaning of the coming of God into the world in finite time and in human form, as a baby, shaped like each one of us in a woman's womb. It offers a time to gather up our sundry longings—some of which we're hardly aware of—for change, for wholeness, for completion, for liberation, what the church has referred to as “the second coming of Christ.”

Isaiah chapter 64 describes (at least) three kinds of longing. It's not surprising, given that this book was written in the context of exile and captivity, that the primary and most pronounced longing is for a *calamitous event that will totally reorder the world*: “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down, that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when the fire kindles brushwood and fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries so that nations might tremble at your presence!” The people of Israel in exile longed for the day not only when they could return home, but when their home would be a place of recognition and honor. They interpreted their shame as shame for God. They wanted their God to be respected and honored.

In 1906 the Chinese population living in San Francisco no doubt shared a similar longing. The first large waves of Chinese immigrants came to the West Coast in the mid-1800s during the Gold Rush. As long as gold was plentiful the Chinese were welcome, or at least tolerated. But as gold deposits diminished, and as the post-Civil War economy lagged, sentiments against the Chinese grew increasingly hostile. In 1888, the US Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. Intended to last for 10 years, the act remained on the books for 50 years. It barred new Chinese immigration, shutting the door to resident Chinese bringing additional family members to the US, and making it impossible for Chinese immigrants without citizenship to leave the country and return. This was clearly an act of racial discrimination since immigrants of other races were allowed to enter. Many Chinese were brutally beaten and they were confined to low-wage jobs such as laundry and restaurant work.¹

The 1906 earthquake had an unexpected, liberating effect on the Chinese community. Since all of the official immigration and citizenship records burned in City Hall and the Hall of Records, thousands of Chinese claimed residency or citizenship and proceeded to bring family members from China to join them. The Chinese also held their own when San Francisco city leaders tried to relocate Chinatown outside of the city limits, but still within the county so they could collect taxes. The Chinese community managed to prevail and rebuild Chinatown in its original location, and they did so in “the newer, modern,

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1906_San_Francisco_earthquake

Western form” that has survived until today.² Thankfully, 100 years later, Chinatown thrives primarily as a tourist attraction and not a residential ghetto. Chinese-American people are well integrated throughout the city and Ed Lee, the current mayor, is of Chinese descent.

The longing for profound, liberating change, felt so deeply by the ancient Israelites in captivity, and by the Chinese in California in 1906, now throbs in the veins of the current immigrant community in the US, particularly among those of Latino descent, as states enact new, restrictive legislation. It throbs in the veins of those in the Occupy movement who feel that the current political discourse and economic arrangements in this country exclude a growing majority. It throbs in the veins of some among us who do not have health insurance and stable employment. And it throbs in the veins of people all over the world who have been victims of earthquakes, violent weather, and political unrest and whose lives and communities have not yet been rebuilt.

Sometimes, when the needs are so great that they overwhelm, there may not be energy for large-scale longing. At these times, the longing takes the form of *a desire for something to simply hold on to*, as a young child grasps onto its parent for comfort and security. Isaiah notes that even this type of longing can be difficult. “There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you,” Isaiah laments (v. 7). The prophet struggles with the question of agency: Is it the people’s fault (because of their sin) that God has turned God’s back? Or have the people turned away because they felt abandoned by God?

These are age-old questions that each of us asks at some point in our lives. Candace Lauth’s cousin Heidi, who is receiving treatment for terminal brain cancer, addressed these questions in a recent blog on her Caring Bridge page. Why has cancer visited in such an aggressive way when she has a family to raise and gifts for ministry to share? Heidi asks these questions not so much to find answers but as her way of calling out for God and taking hold of the One in whom she trusts. Might this be the shape of your longing this Advent season: to simply cry out, like a child, and hold on to God?

Either of these first two types of longing—for something dramatic or something to simply cling to—can draw us into a third type of longing: *for something that shapes and remakes us*. Isaiah moves from the responsibility question to a more foundational, relational point. In verse 8 the prophet addresses God as both parent and potter. “We are clay...we are the work of your hand. We are *all* the work of your hand.” We move from waiting and calling on God, trying to reach out and grab a hold of God, to recognizing that God is already holding on to us. Our very existence is a sign of God’s presence. Each day, each experience, no matter how frustrating, is an opportunity to be shaped by the One who made and loves us...the One who is Emmanuel, God with us.

This longing to be shaped and remade by God requires the attentiveness that we find both in Isaiah and also the Mark text. Isaiah refers to “awesome deeds that we did not expect” and Mark implores us to “be alert and keep awake.” God’s actions do not depend on our attentiveness, but if we are to notice them and to grow and learn from them we must have our eyes open and be mindful.

What is the shape of your longing this Advent Season? May God fill it with awesome deeds you do not expect.

During the Sundays of Advent we will hear stories from within our congregation, related to these “awesome deeds we did not expect.” The stories are shared anonymously as a way for them to become the stories of all of us. This morning’s story is an account of how injury became a door to attentiveness.

Growing up a farm boy meant lots of scrapes and scratches with brothers and cousins but it was all in good fun. When I was 10, I was thrown out of car traveling at 50 miles an hour, ending up on the side of the road unconscious. Regaining consciousness a week later brought a shock; I was going blind in one eye. I began a journey that would take years of paying attention and learning new tricks to figure out how to adjust to the new circumstances.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1906_San_Francisco_earthquake

Losing vision in one eye meant that I no longer had any real depth perception. One of the first awakenings came when Mom asked me to pour the water into the glasses as we all sat down for dinner. I poured water right onto the table, totally missing the first water glass. Whew! Paying attention was going to be required in a new way now.

Back in school the next fall, we were out on the ball field and it was my turn to bat. The ball came in from the pitcher; I swung and missed it --- same thing with the next pitch --- it didn't take but a few more seconds for me to become totally frustrated. Last year I'd been a pretty good hitter, but not now! It took all of the 6th grade year to regain some of my hitting ability. Paying attention wasn't enough on the ball field; I had to develop a whole new set of skills to judge where that darn softball was in the air. When my best friend Ed would stop by to go fishing, I couldn't tie a fish hook onto the end of my line. I'd have to ask him to do it for me. I'd never had to rely on him for that before! Slowly, it began to dawn on me that I really didn't have the ability to see things in 3-D and the little things that we all take for granted that we 'see normally' were the most troublesome.

When I got my driver's license, at age 16, I learned to pay close attention to other cars on the road and the speed other vehicles were traveling in front of me. It took a while to develop a technique, and to trust my judgments about how fast I was coming up on the cars ahead. I logged a couple of minor fender benders, which always brought painful looks from my Dad on my arrival home, but he figured that was the price to pay so that I could learn to be a safe, responsible driver.

I don't miss much in life and being aware of my limitation has taught me to ask for help when I need it from family, friends and God. When I was young, I was constantly frustrated by the things I couldn't do but as I grew up, I came to a deep appreciation of all the things that I can do. Limitations are like brick walls that are in the way; the walls are there so that I can figure out my way around, under, over or through them and move on to the next life experience around the next corner.