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Waiting in the Dark

Foretold: 2021 Advent Series

Isaiah 64:1-9

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It was a few years ago that I decided I wanted to understand this season of Advent a bit better. I wanted to walk through it with a bit more reverence, a bit more worship. So, I bought a book and picked it up and read through it. And, as I was reading, I came across a thought I had never had before. It caught me off guard. The statement that I read that caught me off guard said this. "Advent begins in the dark…Advent begins in the dark." Maybe that strikes you as odd. It struck me as odd. But it's a worthy reflection for us this morning because you might be aware that today is the first day of Advent. Now Advent, of course, is that season that leads up to Christmas Day. It's this march, week by week, towards the moment where we gather to celebrate the sending of God's own Son into the world. Light sent into the darkness—the birth that changed everything—anticipated for generations, foretold by prophet after prophet.

Now, over the coming weeks, we're going to spend some time talking about these prophesies and how the birth of Jesus, the birth of the Messiah, was foretold and how it was the hope of an entire nation, and not just an entire nation, but the entire world. And sometimes, I think, around this time of year, we're tempted just to fast forward to that moment, a little bit like kids when they start to see the presents gather under the tree, right? "Why do we have to wait?" "Why can't we just open the presents?" "Let's move to the joy of Christmas Day."

Why linger on this idea of darkness? I think one reason that it's helpful for us to do that, is because there is something about dwelling on the darkness that helps us appreciate, glory, in the light all the more. Light is good news. Light is a great thing, because darkness is a bad thing. And so, understanding and dwelling a little bit on darkness helps us appreciate the light that much more, and that's certainly a reason that we're going to start there.

But there's another reason that I think is relevant for us. See, the way God set up the world is that He sent His Son into the world to be light in darkness and, yet, we still, as children of the light, we still await that day when all will be set right. We still await that day when all will be light and there will be no more darkness, but we aren't there yet, are we? We are children of the light, but we are called to walk in, struggle against, live in, the midst of a world filled with darkness. So, how do we do that well?

When you find yourself in the midst of darkness, times that seem like they are full of despair, times that are lacking hope, how do you respond? Let's get practical. Just over the past year, I think everyone can agree it was a dark year. How did you find yourself responding? Where did your heart go in the midst of that darkness? Well, Scripture is incredibly clear. In times of darkness, the faithful wait on God…the faithful wait on God! What does that waiting look like? That's what we want to reflect on this morning.

In order to do that, we're going to look at the words of Isaiah, Chapter 64. So, turn your Bibles with me to Isaiah 64. We'll be looking at verses 1 through 9. Now, it's important that we remember that Isaiah—all that takes place in Isaiah—occurred in the midst of deep turmoil, deep darkness. This is a prophet who was prophesying, speaking the Word of God, to a people that were living in exile. They had been overtaken, driven out of the land by Babylonians, Assyrians, by Persians, and living in a land that was not their own, living far away from the land that God gave to them. First run out of their cities, and then, not only that, but their cities were destroyed. And the city of God, Jerusalem, was destroyed; the Temple, demolished. This is a dark hour, a dark time. So, how are the people of God to respond? What does waiting faithfully look like? Isaiah 64, verse 1:

> **Oh, that You would rend the heavens *and* come down,**
> **That the mountains might quake at Your presence —**
> **As fire kindles the brushwood, as fire causes water to boil —**
> **To make Your name known to your adversaries,**
> ***That* the nations may tremble at Your presence!** (*NASB, Isaiah 64:1-2)

Now, this is a prayer of Isaiah, and the way he starts off verse 1 is with that word "**Oh**." And it's hard to capture how much emotion is built up into that word "Oh." This is a word full of angst, a word full of longing. It's almost a wish that he's expressing to God, "Oh, that You would come down. Oh, that You would open up the heavens, the place where you seem far off. Not only that, but, oh, that You would do it, or that You would have already done it." This is a wishing word, kind of an opening to the prayer that is saying, "God, I wish this weren't our situation."

And what does he wish? Well, he wishes that God would come right down into the midst of the turmoil they find themselves in. It's easy to think that when God is in the heavens, in His abode, that He is far off, that He is absent. Isaiah is saying, "Make Yourself known. Bring Your presence right into this darkness we find ourselves in. And if You did that, Lord, what would happen?" Well, Isaiah makes it incredibly clear that if God would step into the midst of the darkness, everything would change. The largest obstacles would be removed. That's what that phrase about the mountains quaking is really meant to convey. Mountains—the largest thing on the scene—if God stepped in, they would be small. They would be insignificant. "There's no obstacle too big, God, if You would step in. Not only that, but, if You would step in, things would start to change and they would change quickly, like fire sets kindling aflame. Like fire causes water to boil, when You come on the scene, everything changes." Isaiah is crying out to God, "Make Your presence known right in our midst." And then he continues. He says that it's not only that change would occur, but it's also the nations would have to take notice. Those who are against You could not deny Your very presence, could not deny Your power. Isaiah is praying that God would step in, step into the darkness.

In this first stanza, there's a stark and important reality for us. And it is that whatever we are walking through, whatever darkness we might find ourselves in, the only solution is that God would show up on the scene. Isaiah is crying out to God, "Make Yourself known," not because it is the morally correct thing to say, but because it is the only thing that will solve the problem they find themselves in. It is the only thing that will suffice. God stepping in on the scene—it's his first inclination.

So often I think, if you're anything like me, so often my mind turns to God, not as a first response, but as a last resort. So often I find that my inclination, when I'm in times of trial, times of struggle, my inclination is to try to power up, handle it in my way. Use my ingenuity, use my mind, use my ability to even—I know none of you do this—but to even manipulate others with my words so that things turn out the way I want them to turn out, to start to manipulate the world to accomplish the ends that I've decided need to occur. And, finally, when I'm exhausted, finally, then I realize, "Oh, this isn't working. I need to turn to God." It's my last resort. Too often we think that way, but God is not a last resort.

As I was reflecting on this, I was reminded of this kind of pithy minister's joke, okay? It's a ministry joke. I don't know that it will resonate, but it resonates with me because it cuts to the heart for me. The joke goes like this: There was a minister that went to visit an older gentleman that was in a hospital. He was in for a routine procedure, nothing serious. After visiting with that man, he then went out to the waiting room and was chatting with the man's wife. And after they'd shared a few pleasantries, he said to the wife, "Well, we should pray now." And his wife said, "Oh, no, is it that serious? Is it so serious that we ought to pray?" We think that way sometimes, don't we? So serious that we ought to turn to God and ask Him to intervene? So serious that we ought to reach out to Him and ask Him to come and make Himself known in whatever we're dealing with, even whether it's big or small? So often we turn to God as a last resort, but Isaiah here reminds us that God is not a last resort. He needs to be our first response because He is the only one that can step into the darkness we find ourselves in, and bring resolution His way. He is not a last resort.

So, in the midst of darkness, the faithful wait upon God. And sometimes the first step in waiting faithfully—an active waiting—is to turn our attention to Him, to bring our troubles before Him and say, "God, if You don't show up, we are in trouble. Don't let me do this on my own." God is not a last resort. So, in the midst of darkness, will we as people, will we prayerfully wait for God? Now, if that is our response, it is ultimately an expression of our trust in Him. So often, where we turn, is evidence to where we place our trust. So, the question becomes, "Is God trustworthy?"

Isaiah continues in verse 3. He turns his mind to the past in order to reflect on God's trustworthiness. He says:

> **When You did awesome things which we did not expect,**
> **You came down, the mountains quaked at Your presence.**
> **For from days of old they have not heard or perceived by ear,**
> **Nor has the eye seen a God besides You,**
> **Who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him.**
> **You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness,**
> **Who remembers You in Your ways.** (Vs. 3-5a)

The people of Israel made a habit of constantly recounting the acts of God on their behalf. When they joined together to sing, their songs were reflections on who God was, but more than that, on what God had done. So often, when we read through the psalms, we read of God, that You are the God that brought us out of Egypt. You led us through the sea. There's a recounting of all

the faithful acts of God, the way He showed up on the scene, surprised them as a people, and displayed His power, a power that is not of this world. So, as Isaiah continues his prayer, it's almost as if he is saying, in this stanza, "God, what we are asking, it's not as if it is without precedent. You have done it before. Over and over and over again, You have shown Yourself to be powerful, to intervene on our behalf. We are asking You to do it again…do it again!"

I hope that, over this past week—Thanksgiving, right? I hope that you took some time, and you took Matt up on his suggestion from last week, his offer to spend a little bit of time dwelling on all the things that you have to be thankful for…all the gratefulness that we should have as people, because of the way that God has acted in our life. If you didn't do that, if the time came and went and the stuffing burned, or something like that, and you just couldn't find the time, make time. What's the point of that? Well, the point of that isn't just to walk through some kind of exercise. The point of that is that, as we reflect on what God has done, it begins to build up our confidence, our faith, our trust in who He is. What He has done, He will do. It helps us remember that, in the past, we maybe thought that we needed to handle things on our own, but God came and intervened. Now we need to ask Him, "God, do it again!" In the midst of darkness, the faithful wait upon God. And, at times, waiting faithfully means remembering who He has proven Himself to be and what He has done. And then, with that remembrance, then moving forward in faith, believing that what He did, He will do again.

When I was a senior at Wheaten College, I fell into what I can only call a pretty significant depression. I was coming towards the end of my senior year, and all I've got to say is that everything felt joyless. The world was gray; things seemed to be without any kind of flavor. And even those things which, at one point, had been so rich to me, when I opened God's Word, when I sought Him in prayer, those things even seemed dull. I didn't know what to do with that. It was the first time in my life that I ever considered abandoning the faith that had been built into me over the course of my 20 or 21 years. But, as I reflected on that, as I thought about whether or not it was something that I should do, God brought to mind all that He had done, all of the ways He had been faithful, all the ways He had blessed me by who He had brought into my life, by the family He had given me, by the things that He had allowed me to experience. God had done so well by me. Now, in that moment, it is incredibly tempting to say, "Yeah, God, that's nice, but I'm asking for a fresh work. I'm asking for a new thing." But in that moment, God, supplying this remembrance, allowed me to say, "Okay, this is what He has done. He will do it again. I'm going to press forward in obedience. I'm going to be a person who rejoices in righteousness, because God has proven Himself faithful." In the midst of darkness, the faithful wait upon God and, sometimes, waiting will mean actively remembering what God has done for you, the ways He has richly blessed you. Will you recall, will you recount the ways that He has acted on your behalf? Because the God that we serve, He does not change. What He has done, He will do again.

Now, sometimes, as we reflect on this, part of what happens is, what seeps into our minds is this thought: "Well, I know that God won't change, but what if, what if I've exhausted Him? You know what? What if, this time, the darkness I find myself in, what if it's partly of my own doing? Will He still respond? I'm a pretty sinful person. What if, what if He's just tired of it? What if I've hit the limits of His graciousness? If I turn to Him, will He respond?

Isaiah wrestled with this same question. Think about his tenure as a prophet. He saw a lot of darkness. So, he reflects on this idea in verse 5, the second part of verse 5. He says to God:

Behold, You were angry, for we sinned,
***We continued* in them a long time;**
And shall we be saved?

His is a sobering statement. Consider for a moment all that Isaiah witnessed as he was a prophet of Israel, constantly calling the people to repentance. But even when they repented, they constantly fell back into sin, constantly fell back into rebellion. And now, not just Isaiah, but consider God, all that God had endured with Israel. Ever since He made them His people, they had been running from Him. So, Isaiah asked this very honest question: **Shall we be saved**? As he continues in verse 6, his reflection on sin continues:

For all of us have become like the one who is unclean,
And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;
And all of us wither like a leaf,
And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on Your name,
Who arouses himself to take hold of You;
For You have hidden Your face from us,
And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities.

In just these few verses, there is a pretty colorful theology of sin that Isaiah gives us. Now, sin is not a really popular topic. It's not something we enjoy talking about all that much, but it's important for us to understand what it is and what it does. And Isaiah gives us a reflection, gives us a few images on what sin is like. First thing he says is that sin leaves a stain. It stains. It leaves a mark. I drink a lot of coffee, too much some would say. And so, therefore, I spill a lot of coffee on a lot of shirts. And one thing I know about stains is that one little drop of coffee makes a much bigger stain than I would ever think. One little drop, and that stain just grows; it spreads. It's what stains do. That's what sin does. The other thing I know is that, when I come home at night, if I throw that shirt at the end of my bed and leave it there, that stain will not resolve itself, will it? The stain has to be dealt with. Sin has to be dealt with.

As I was reflecting on this, my mind went back to a story that made me wonder, "Is this idea of stain, is it still relevant for us today, because we live in an age of wrinkle-free clothing, right? And not just that, but stain resistant clothing. My cousin, Matt, who tragically passed away a year ago, was a bit of a clothes hawk. I know Jeff, a few months ago or whenever it was, called me a fashionista. I have yet to repay him for that. His day is coming. But whatever I am, Matt was that, plus, like a hundred. Matt was an interesting guy. He was a football player and a fashion merchandising major. You don't see that combo too often—a big, burly, dandy gentleman. Right? Well, I was fortunate enough to be able to go to grad school at the same time that my younger brother and two cousins were undergrads at the same school. And so we were all eating together often. And one time, Matt came in and he was wearing brand-new clothing and he proudly announced, "These are stain-resistant clothes. The shirt, the pants—stain resistant—nothing can penetrate this fabric." So, my brother and my cousin who were eating

with him at the time took him up on that offer, and we immediately picked up our Coke and our juice and we threw it immediately at Matt. All over his chest. That liquid just ricocheted…just ricocheted off his clothing. Stain resistant! Matt stood up, ceremoniously brushed himself off, and all the liquid was gone, not a single stain in sight.

Oh, if only sin was like that, right? Just bounces off…ricochets away. But that's not what sin does. Isaiah has given us here an incredibly vivid picture of sin. The second thing he says about sin is that sin impoverishes life. It robs us of life. We become *like a withering leaf, blown about by the wind,* tossed about here and there, losing all substance, losing all vitality. You imagine a green leaf in the summer and then you look outside now at these leaves just blowing here and there. That's what sin does to us. It deadens; it destroys; it robs us of life; it makes us people without substance.

It's important for us to think about sin. Sometimes I think, in our world, we start to forget what sin is like, because our world does an incredibly good job of dressing it up and making it appear desirable, doesn't it? Our world makes sin look desirable, but that is not what sin is like. Sin is not desirable. Sin deadens; sin destroys; sin is folly and stupidity. It is the worst thing to do in any situation. Sometimes I think that we are prone to think of sin as preferable but forbidden to us, as if it were the best way to live—boy, the most fun! If you really want to have fun, sin. But we can't do that, because God told us not to. And so, now, we've kind of got to grit our teeth and hope that in the next life, the life after death, we'll finally have some fun. Sin is preferable but forbidden. That's the way that our mind starts to think of sin, but that is a lie. Sin is folly. Sin leads to death. It destroys; it withers; it robs us of life.

The last think Isaiah says about sin is, it makes us almost spiritually lethargic. Isaiah says there's no one that calls upon You. No one arouses himself from slumber to reach out to You, God. Sin makes us lazy and it's a tragic thing because the only resolution to sin, the only sufficient answer to sin, is that God intervenes. But what sin does to us is it makes us resistant to the very thing that could solve the problem. Surrender to God is the solution to sin, and yet, sin causes us to be resistant to surrender and think, "I'm going to keep going it alone. I'm going to keep doing it my way." Tragic to watch; all of us have seen it. A friend or a family member that you see—the solution is right in front of them—and yet they continue to resist.

Jenee and I have recently been watching a show where there's someone who is an addict, and there was a moment where there was an opportunity for an intervention, and the whole family came together. "We just want to help you." This person willfully just said, "No, I'm going my own way." It's tragic when that happens. That's what sin does. And it's easy to look at others and think that that's not us, but there are times where that is us as well. It's exactly what we do. In the midst of darkness, the faithful wait upon God. And sometimes waiting means looking in the mirror. It means looking at ourselves and acknowledging the ways that we have gone wrong, the ways that we've maybe allowed sin to sneak into our life. Maybe even the ways that some of the darkness we find ourselves in, isn't necessarily we are a victim of, but maybe it is something that we have contributed to ourselves. We're like that; we do that. And waiting in the dark sometimes means turning to God and acknowledging to Him, "You know what, Lord? I have run from You, and I have run towards sin. I need to own it, confess it to You, and that I can't fix it…I can't fix it." In the midst of darkness, the faithful wait upon God.

So, Church, if we turn to God in the midst of that acknowledgement, will He receive us? Well, the answer is, "Of course He will…of course He will." Isaiah continues in verse 8:

But now, O Lord, You are our Father,
We are the clay, and You our potter;
And all of us are the work of Your hand.
Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord,
Nor remember iniquity forever;
Behold, look now, all of us are Your people.

In the midst of great darkness, the faithful wait upon God. They don't power up. They don't manipulate things. They don't try to use others in order to make things turn out right. They turn to God. They wait upon Him. They remember what He has done. They acknowledge ways they have gone wrong. Then they ask Him to come in and restore. The faithful wait upon God. Will He restore? Will He respond? Answer: "Absolutely, He will." Why? Well, because He's our Father…He is our Father! He is the One to whom we owe our very existence. He brought us into being. He has nurtured us. He has saved us from the pit of despair. He is our Father, and He will respond, not because of our goodness, but because of His very nature.

He's also our Creator. He's the potter; we are the clay. I'm not very creative, but I know that even when I create something that's not very impressive, I am very taken with it. I just behold it and cherish it. I think it's the greatest thing ever. I love it and I care for it. We are His creation. Ephesians says we are His masterpiece. He cherishes you; therefore He will not remain angry. Not because of our goodness, but because of His very nature and because of how much He loves us. In the midst of darkness, the faithful wait upon God. And to actively wait, is to remember, not just what He has done, but who He is…who He is. He is our Father, our Creator.

Now, I don't know what everyone's situation is that's walked in today, but all of us, I know, are walking through trials. We all do that, right? We are living in the midst of a dark world. I don't know all the stories, but I know some of the stories. And as I was thinking about this, I thought how would it look, what would it look like to actively wait? And I began thinking about the fact that, during Thanksgiving, you know, it could be a stressful time. Twenty-three people crammed into one house; a lot of tensions can flare. And families are hard. And I wonder, "Is your family experiencing some dysfunction? Are things not going the way that you hoped they would?" What would it look like to wait upon God? What would it look like in that situation? Well I know, in our flesh, what it looks like is we want to power up and we want to control and we want to tell everyone what's what and what is right: Tell Uncle Joe and Aunt Betty to stop saying that and stop doing that. We want to strengthen our grip and wield things to go our way. But to wait faithfully, is to turn to God, to ask Him to intervene, to give a kind word, to lift up our family in prayer, to turn to God and say, "God, You can resolve this." Sometimes, waiting faithfully might mean acknowledging, "You know what? I've contributed to this dysfunction. I've contributed and, Lord, I need to confess that to You." Maybe I need to confess that to someone else and start to make peace and believe that You will bring about flourishing as I turn this to You and wait upon You to resolve what only You can resolve.

Maybe you find yourself in a job that you just hate, and you're so tempted to kind of go your own way and kind of barge out before you even know whether God has something else for you. And maybe, in your flesh, you're so tempted to be miserable with your co-workers and just be a horrible employee—create a horrible culture—that'll teach them! What would it look like to wait for God? It would be lifting it up to Him, asking Him to intervene. It would be believing that He will come down in the midst of the darkness. Even though you don't know where He's at in that situation, He is present, and He is working. And until He shows you the next step, maybe what it means to wait faithfully is to believe that He has a reason for you to be in the very situation you're in. And maybe it means to be someone who continues to rejoice in righteousness, to live as a child of the light in the midst of a dark world, that God might show His goodness to those that are around you.

I don't know what your situation is, but maybe I would just ask this: Will you ask God to reveal to you what it would mean to wait for Him—what it would mean, in the midst of the darkness, to wait faithfully for our God? I began by saying that Advent begins in the dark and, over these coming weeks, we are going to move more and more towards all the light that Christ brings. He is the Lord, the King that will reign forever, and we are going to rejoice and celebrate that as we march up towards Christmas Eve and towards Christmas Day. And yet, we are a people that are still living in a midst of a dark world, and we long for the day when Jesus will come back on the scene, and He will sit on the throne and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess He is Lord. But, until that day, let us be a people that wait for Him in the midst of darkness. Let us be a people, a church, that waits for God.

Will you join me as we pray?

> *Lord, You are our Father. You are our Creator. We are the clay in your hands. Lord, we don't always know what You're doing, but we want to be a people that trusts You. So, stir up our faith, we pray. Help us to see the ways that You are moving in our world when we just don't see it. Father, help us to be people that turn to You first, that believe that what You have done, You will do again; and who You are is who You will always be. And, therefore, we can walk in righteousness because we trust You. So, help us we pray. Jesus, we praise You. We praise You for coming into the darkness and being the light of the world. Help us reflect Your light to a world that is living in darkness. We pray all these things in Your name, Amen.*

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