

“The Yearning”
1 Corinthians 1:3-9 and Mark 13:24-37
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The other night at Thanksgiving dinner, in spite of what was available at the table, the conversation turned to “that which is not available” in Costa Rica, in terms of food. There is not much, mind you, that eludes us here anymore, but there are certain foodstuffs for which I yearn, and which are not available except through the good graces of fellow travelers who fill their suitcases with what I crave. My list includes noodles, blue cornmeal, and yellow lemons, all of which used to be a regular part of my diet. I have not yet convinced anyone to smuggle in fresh fruit for me, so I guess I will have to be content with bottled lemon juice, until the Lord comes.

In one form or another, all four of today’s lectionary texts deal with human yearnings, though not for things so mundane as kitchen comforts. In the Isaiah passage and the Psalm, the prophet and the poet yearn for God’s divine and dramatic intervention that will turn around the fortunes of the people. They are in such dire straights that only God is capable of doing what is necessary for God’s people to be restored to their former state of blessing. Their enemies have savaged them, they feel forsaken, they wait and plead for the Lord’s might to save them. Indeed, they even appeal to God’s own yearning as they try to bargain with God for the divine presence: “Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and

glorious habitation. Where are your zeal and might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion?” If all else fails, perhaps a little flattery and a reminder of who God is supposed to be might work. They yearn for their peace and restoration, and hope that their God does to.

A similar but different kind of yearning is evident in the New Testament passages from Mark and First Corinthians. In these, the yearning is not so much for peace and restoration, but for completion, for the fulfillment of the promises of God’s righteous kingdom. While the Old Testament writers yearn for the reestablishment of the old order, it is a new order that is the object of the early church’s hope, waiting, and yearning in the days after Jesus’ departure. They had already had a glimpse of the glory of God in their travels with Jesus and yearned for more, and so they remembered Jesus’ words about that time, as we read in Mark: “Then the Son of Man will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven,” and they reminded one another of that promised day, as we heard from Paul in Corinthians: “He will strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In a world they perceived as dying all around them, they looked forward to that unknown but not unexpected day with a fervor and a faith, but most of all with a kind of yearning that perhaps we have a hard time comprehending, when all we lack are noodles, blue cornmeal, and yellow lemons.

Of course, we yearn for more than noodles. We yearn for our children and grandchildren, that they may experience life as fully, or perhaps even more fully, than we do. We yearn for peaceful and painless final days for our parents and grandparents, and perhaps even ourselves if we dare to contemplate those days ahead. We yearn for the unfulfilled dreams of our youth, and the books we had hoped to read, the places we hoped we'd see, the new tastes we'd hoped to savor. We yearn for the moments when it all seemed to come together in the most perfect harmony and balance, when the musician's notes struck the deepest chord in our souls, and the poet's words captured our truest, unexpressed feelings. We yearn for a beauty we'll never see again, and to touch what can never again be held in our grasp. Yes, we yearn for more than what we lack at the grocery store.

Advent is the season of yearning. It is the time to remember the yearning of our ancestors in the faith, and to stir up once again our own yearnings for God, and the promises God has made. In the northern hemisphere, Advent begins before the winter solstice, in that time of the year when the days are at their longest, when the darkness seems more and more oppressive and our yearning for the sun grows with each passing day. Perhaps it is more than just historical tinkering that the day we celebrate Christ's birth was also the date of the winter solstice on the Roman calendar used at the time. We yearn for the sun, we yearn for light, we yearn for the changing of the seasons, and the sign that change brings that the world still spins, that the cold, or the rain, will eventually give way to the feel of warmth on

our faces, and afternoons without umbrellas, indeed we yearn that hope still exists somewhere in the darkening world.

It may be that by accident of birth, social location, or historical circumstances, where earthly matters are concerned, we in this room yearn for less than some of our brothers and sisters. If where food is concerned, we long only for comfort food, our burdens are indeed light. If where our bodies are concerned, we yearn mainly for good health into our advancing years to enjoy more fully our retirements, our blessings are indeed many. If, where our vocations are concerned, we desire mostly to have meaningful work, those desires are mostly satisfied. I say this not to diminish our cravings, but to put them in some perspective. For the most part, we do not have to worry about having our faces disfigured by acid thrown by vengeful ex-husbands and other controlling men, as happens to a disturbingly large number of women in many south Asian countries. For the most part, we do not have to worry that our church will be burned down by members of other faiths, as happens even to Christians in Latin American countries with predominantly Christian populations. For the most part we do not have to spend half the day walking to fetch water or firewood, as is the reality of countless women and children around the world. On this Sunday following Thanksgiving, may we give thanks that we have the luxury to yearn for such mundane things as noodles, and not simply freedom from the kinds of truly difficult lives and circumstances found so easily in the morning's newspaper.

And so the yearning of this season of Advent will be what we make of it, since we have such relative freedom to yearn for almost anything we like, instead of what we most desperately need to survive. Our challenge then is to take advantage of this gift, and not squander it; to cultivate a yearning that means something, a yearning that perhaps even addresses the yearning of the world for light in the midst of darkness. I'd like to suggest tonight that in addition to whatever each of us makes of this opportunity of Advent individually, or as a family, that we also give attention to the opportunity we have together as this particular body of believers. So since tonight is my last chance to encourage your yearning for God's vision for ECF before our retreat together on Saturday, I want to offer just a few brief thoughts on this special kind of yearning, and how it relates to the season of Advent, and especially to the Apostle Paul's words to the church at Corinth. Listen again to what he wrote: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that you have been given in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

We could be forgiven for reading these words as a mere extension of the salutation Paul is giving the Corinthians before he moves on to the weightier matters of his letter, but that would be a bit like squandering the opportunity of this Advent and going straight to Christmas. That is because in these almost throwaway verses before he launches into a discussion of the divisions within their church, there is a great wealth about which to yearn, if that is how we hope to spend our Advent. If we were to cultivate our yearning for nothing more than grace, revelation, call, and Jesus Christ, we should have had a meaningful Advent, for a deeper longing for these things should be enough to truly prepare for the coming of the Lord once and again.

“Grace to you and peace,” Paul says. “I give thanks to God because of the grace that has been given to you.” Paul knows that we can never be reminded enough of God’s grace, so that we can never fail to respond to that grace. With a deeper sense of God’s grace in our lives, comes a deeper compassion, a fuller outrage at injustice, a sharpened sense of opportunity. That amazing grace, how sweet the sound, saves wretches, finds the lost, and makes blind eyes see, but most of all demands a response. That response may take us to some challenging and scary places, but does that make our yearning for God’s grace any less urgent?

“You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,” Paul writes. Paul may have been talking about the revealing of Christ at the second coming, but the saying is no less true when we talk about

God's ongoing revelation. We are not lacking in any spiritual gift as we wait for the revealing of God's vision for ECF. Indeed, if we are lacking anything, it can only be a deeper yearning for that revelation, that dream of God's for our ministry, for God has already equipped us for our discernment. The real question for us is the urgency of our desire for this revelation. Does God hear in our voices the same urgency heard in the voices of Isaiah and the Psalmist, for God's direct involvement in their lives and destinies?

“God is faithful,” Paul says. “By him you were called into the fellowship of his son.” You know as well as I do that this call was not just to the turkey dinner we are about to share together after the service. Our fellowship is an important aspect of our call, but it cannot be confused with the call itself to relationship with Christ and the church. We know that our call is to deeper discipleship, to a specific purpose, to the hardest kind of work we'll ever be filled with joy to do. Do we yearn to live that call, like Paul did in his ministry to the Gentiles, like he did in his thanksgiving and encouragement for the Corinthians?

Finally, in these seven verses before us tonight, Paul invokes Jesus Christ six times, a signal of how integral to our yearning the Son of Man really is. There is no future apart from Christ. There is no hope apart from Christ. There is no vision, not even an ECF, apart from Christ. There is no community, no fellowship, no knowledge, no strength, no revelation apart from Jesus Christ our Lord. There is no object of our devotion, service, or yearning other than the Jesus Christ in whom we

have received the grace which brings us life, love, and liberty to pursue the call we have been given. Do we yearn for Jesus Christ as much as we yearn for Christmas, or noodles?

For next weekend, I am convinced that we are not lacking any spiritual gift. If we lack anything, it is the knowledge of the timetable of our God, and perhaps a yearning for grace, revelation, call and Christ which makes us worthy of being entrusted with a vision. Like Paul, we have the audacity to expect the revealing of Jesus Christ, even if we must wait until the end. But if we must wait, God will “strengthen us to the end,” whenever that end may come. May our Advent find us yearning for vision, community, and purpose, but most of all for Jesus Christ into whose fellowship we have been called by the incomparable grace of God. Amen.