

Sermon preached on 4-Dec-2011 at The Light of Christ Denver

I would like to dedicate this sermon to an Australian mate, Kristian Anderson, his wife Rachel and their two little boys. After two years of chemotherapy Kristian is now in a hospice, waiting. In his fight against cancer, Kristian has shown faithfulness despite disappointment, hope in the face of despair, and courageous love in the midst of severe suffering. He has already lived out this sermon. So, Kristian, this one's for you.

Stepping Back from the Painting

Two years ago I was in Chicago, speaking at a software development conference. I was fortunate enough to be able to take a day off and be a bit of a tourist around downtown. One of the highlights of the trip was visiting the Art Institute of Chicago, and one painting that made a big impact on me is called "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" by George-Pierre Seurat. This painting is "one of the most beloved, famous, and frequently reproduced paintings in the world." Seurat painted the scene using a technique called pointillism, where the painting – all 65 square feet of it – is composed of thousands upon thousands of tiny dots of different colors. From a distance it looks like any other painting - you clearly see the scene of 19th century people enjoying some time relaxing by the river. It's only when you get close to the painting that you realize that Seurat did not use brush strokes. In fact, when you are close to the painting, you cannot tell at all what the painting is about. It's only when you draw back far enough from the dots and they converge in your vision that the scene starts to become clear. There is something very clever, but also very beautiful, in the way this painting does this.

I want to suggest that this is like how our Advent readings function today. In these texts, we step back from the disordered details of life and are given a vision of the deeper picture of what God is doing moment-by-moment in his world. These texts transcend the chaotic confusion of the everyday and show us a deeper and more profound perspective. This perspective is a longer one, looking back to ancient promises that God has made, and looking forward - to the future fulfillment of those staggering promises. And this picture is a deeper one, one that affirms that every little thing we do in our work, in our play, in our families, in our church community, in all of our lives, matters to God and his plan.

The Scripture texts today invite us to take a few steps back from the thousands of paint dots that make up our lives, especially the busyness of this time of year, of presents, and shopping, and attending events. And take some time in God's art gallery admiring and pondering the grand painting of God's plan. And let it do its quiet work in our hearts.

Because cultivating this deeper and longer view, and understanding what it means for us today, leads to *anticipation* of the vision becoming reality, and that gives us hope. This deeper and longer view inspires hope in the present even as we sense a growing longing, an anticipation of the future. And this anticipation is what Advent is all about.

The fact is that the entire theme of this season of Advent is that of anticipation. We live into the experiences of God's Old Testament people and we anticipate the hope he brings to us through Jesus, the Messiah. We continue to anticipate his entrance into our lives and our world on a daily basis. And we anticipate the day when God enters our world dramatically and decisively through the second coming of our savior, Jesus Christ.

God has a plan for his entire creation, and we are privileged from time to time in Scripture for God pull us back from the details of the dots and give us the deeper, longer view into what he is doing. Isaiah 40:1-11 is one of those opportunities to step back and see the painting - a chance to view things from God's perspective. The text says "Comfort my people...speak tenderly to Jerusalem" Why? What is going on that would make sense of this? In the early 6th century BC the Jews were stripped of their possessions, all they considered important, and were torn from their homeland and carried away in captivity to Babylon. Their beautiful city Jerusalem and the surrounding regions they left behind were in shambles. They were demoralized. They wondered: "Maybe God has abandoned us? Maybe God has forgotten us?" Circumstances were worse than they could ever have possibly have imagined: after hundreds of years of unfaithfulness to God, he had brought down his judgment on his people: they had lost all their possessions, they had lost their promised land, and they had lost the temple of God in Jerusalem. God's people knew they had failed. As they went about their daily lives in this foreign land, God seemed so far away. This was their darkest hour.

Yet, through the prophet in this text we hear God announcing to his people that things are about to change. This passage says that the time for judgment has passed, and it is time to start the process of bringing his people home. Craig Loscalzo said, these words in Isaiah "are words of hope for an oppressed people, a lonely, struggling people, clinging with bloodied fingers to faith elusive." Like the first Exodus out of captivity from Egypt, once more God will lead his people to the land of promise.

The prophet is speaking for God to his people, and announcing in verses 6-8 that God has not changed. Unlike flowers and grass, here today and gone tomorrow, God remains, and he will keep the promises he had made. In verse 9 the prophet is proclaiming to a beleaguered people: "Be ready for God when he comes, because one day this good news - this gospel - will be shouted out in Jerusalem and in Judea: 'Here is your God!'"

What do we do when our circumstances don't line up with what we expect from God? When we struggle with disappointment? How do we stand firm in our confidence that God is in control, and is accomplishing his purpose when there is nothing we can see that would indicate this to be true? These are exactly the questions that God's people in 6th century Babylon struggled with. 500 years later this promise had still not yet been completely fulfilled, even through hundreds of years of oppression and foreign occupation. By the 1st century the Jews were desperate for God to act decisively and finally send his messenger. So these are the

same questions that weighed so heavily on the people of God in 1st century Palestine. They asked: "Where is our God? What is he doing? When will he restore us? When will he make everything right again? When will his rule be established, so that his will is done on earth as it is in heaven?"

When you read the Gospel of Mark, you can't help but notice that this is a story where none of the characters other than Jesus seem to have any idea what is going on. The main character, Jesus the prophet from an obscure town called Nazareth in northern Palestine, chooses to keep his origin, agenda and plan a mystery. Bible scholars even have a term for this: they call it the "messianic secret." Jesus refuses to reveal his plan to all but his closest followers, and even then they are confused and disillusioned about the things he says and does. Most of the time, like the characters in Mark's Gospel, we are in the dark too. We don't have God's perspective of the whole painting; we are right at the dot-level.

These first few verses in Mark's gospel are only one of two times in the story where we get to see things from a deeper and longer perspective. We are told things about Jesus and John the Baptist that the rest of the characters in the Gospel are left to figure out for themselves, and usually get wrong. Mark 1:1-9 gives the heavenly perspective on what is about to happen in the rest of the story. And what we learn is that God's promises always trump our circumstances.

The people knew that John the Baptist was a prophet, a spokesman for God, calling the nation to get back into proper relationship with him. He dressed like a prophet, ate like a prophet and spoke like a prophet. Also, he was in the wilderness, the place where they expected a prophet would be. They knew from Isaiah 40, our previous text, that there would be a voice in the wilderness, calling the people to make ready for God to come to Israel and establish his rule.

Being baptized by John was like coming through the Jordan all over again as a new people, freshly rescued from captivity by their God and ready for his rule to be revealed. John preached this baptism of repentance: calling God's people to orient their lives around their God, and his promises, and his agenda. John declared that this one to come would be mightier than him, and as a result called God's people to return to their God, to return from exile and re-enter the promised land.

But God is a god of the unexpected. Our God keeps his promises, but in his own time, and in surprising ways – even as he keeps his word, he overturns our expectations about how he might do it. You see, later passages in Isaiah talk about the suffering servant, and how shocking and scandalous it must have been for Jesus's followers to realize that Jesus, the king of Israel, was the Lord himself, and that he had come this time to suffer and to die, rather than to start a revolution and rule. He was misunderstood, misjudged and eventually executed as a threat to the political and religious powers of the day. Yet this death was no defeat. This was his finest hour. Jesus was God's chosen agent to bring in God's rule, not by raising an army of zealots and conquering the Romans, which is what everyone expected, but by suffering and dying on a cruel Roman cross.

The biggest surprise of all was that the Messiah had to suffer and die: there had to be a cross to be a resurrection, and there had to be a resurrection before the Messiah could rule as king. And in God's plan it wasn't just the nation of Israel that Jesus the Messiah would rule, but the whole cosmos. His resurrection was God's stamp of approval on what he had done, and the beginning of the New Creation. With his resurrection, Jesus in the 1st century started this great work of restoring creation, and us along with it. And, at his return, he will bring this great work to fulfillment.

The promises are not all yet fulfilled, but that does not mean that God is not present, not active or that he has forgotten his promises. His plan is so amazing and wonderful and epic, that no one could ever figure it out ahead of time. Some today will say, "It's been 2 thousand years, and still nothing. Where is Christ? When will he return?" What if it is another two thousand years? What if another 500 generations pass before this promise comes true. 2 Peter 3 predicts a purification by fire of this world. What if this verse is about when the Sun turns into a red giant in about 7.5 billion years? I'm not sure I want to wait *that* long. But that might be God's timing. On the other hand, what if it happens tomorrow? Or today? We just don't know. But the timing doesn't matter. What matters is living in light of the promise.

This is where the rest of our last text, 2 Peter 3 can help, because once again we get to step back from the dots to the deeper and longer view. A view into the divine purpose that just looking at circumstances will never allow us to see. Looking at circumstances will only steer us in the wrong direction. God's promises trump our circumstances.

2 Peter says that the reason God is taking his time is not because he has lost the plot. Rather, it's because he is so magnificently kind and patient. His patience can be mistaken for slowness or inattentiveness. But, as Paul wrote in the letter to church in Rome, it's his kindness that leads us to repentance, to be continuously resetting our compass to his true North. God's word to us is the same today as it was to the captives in Babylon 2500 years ago, and to his people by the Jordan River in the 1st century: "Here is your God!" These things are not a mystery to him, and neither are we. He knows us through and through, and understands our struggles. Not just because he is our creator, but also because he became human like us: Jesus, "Emmanuel," God with us.

Advent is a special time in the year to reflect on the 2nd coming of Jesus Christ and the New Creation - to live in anticipation of these, and arrange our lives around that expectation. We ask ourselves: "What kind of life would we want our Lord to find us living upon his return?" Are we living in such a way that, as verse 13 says: we are "in keeping with his promise?" What does this mean? At a minimum, it means living in earnest expectation of Jesus stepping into history again in glory and triumph, putting everything right and restoring creation to how God intends it to be. It means parenting, working, playing, laughing, weeping - living, despite this broken

and damaged world, as if Christ was living his life through us – which he is. As Mother Theresa said, it's not about doing great things, but doing small things with great love. Or, as 2 Peter 3 says in verse 11: "live holy and godly lives" and, in verse 14: "Make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him." Steve Camp has a song from 1989 that was very influential for me, called "Living Dangerously in the Hands of God" where he says: "There's safety in complacency, but God is calling us out of our comfort zone and into a life of complete surrender to the cross. To live dangerously is not to live recklessly but righteously. And it is because of God's radical grace for us that we can risk living a life of radical obedience for him."

None of the biblical authors saw God's promises completely fulfilled in their lifetimes. But when God acts, he surprises us - he is the God of the promise, kept in unexpected ways. Scripture - as we have seen this morning - gives us hints, glimpses, peeks into the mind of God. Without these, perhaps we might lose hope entirely. We know that this universe is not just some kind of purposeless process, careening out of control to who knows where? And it's not a clock that some disinterested deity wound up and stepped back from to admire. No. Our God is intimately involved in every moment and every event. This creation is on track to achieve his purposes, and he will do that in his time.

It's hard to get excited about something that might not even happen in our lifetimes. But it's not about excitement; it's about hope and faithfulness. These are truths to live by, not slogans to put on bumper stickers. These are the truths that sustained Corrie Ten Boom in the concentration camp. These are the truths that led Martin Luther King Jr to champion civil rights for all. These are the truths that led Kristian Anderson to write a few months ago about his cancer, "I am not afraid because I am comfortable with the thought of dying, not at all...I am not afraid because I know I can trust God with my very life...because I know he will deal with me lovingly and with great care." We make choices today in the light of what we believe about tomorrow. We arrange our lives around the truths that we hold dear. We pray, because Jesus knew that our prayers into God's ever-present love for us, and cause him to act in supernatural ways according to what we request.

The apostle Paul said, "Don't be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" and "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." What we fill our imaginations with matters. We need to ignite our imaginations with a joyful expectation of God acting today in the mundane, knowing that we live between the pivotal moments of the resurrection of Christ and his return. Let us take our thoughts captive with these words of Scripture - let them inform every decision we make. We must not let our imaginations, our sense of vision, be held captive by our circumstances, by only what we can see. Scripture says that, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen."

May the Holy Spirit be the fuel that kindles these words. May God cause us to look deeper, to look farther than we ever have before. Strain to see more deeply what

God is up to in the present, and strain to reach farther into what God will accomplish for his creation in the future. This good news, this Gospel, is so much bigger and more wonderful than we could ever envision. We are part of something grand, something more than just the everyday, something that involves everything from galaxies to neutrinos, from giraffes to stegosauruses, to every person that ever lived - however great or small their life might have seemed to them and others. We are part of the New Creation, where we will have immortal bodies so far in power and wonder beyond our present frail ones that our minds can't even comprehend, but we stretch out in hope towards this promise. Christ's miracles in the Gospels and in our church community today are a small sample, a taste, of what it will be like to be with him forever - in a restored creation where death is but a dim memory, tears but an echo of a distant past, and we have immortal eyes to see the reality that every moment is infused with God's grandeur and grace.

There's a pivotal scene in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* where, for a brief moment, beautiful opera music is piped through the sound system of Shawshank prison. The music is so profound, so deep and touching, that these hardened prisoners, while the music is playing, all stop what they are doing and listen - they experience a taste of freedom, of somehow transcending through the music their circumstances of captivity and hopelessness. They experience a depth of longing, an aching, a yearning in the song that lifts them out of their imprisonment. As one of the characters says, "And for the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank felt free."

These Scripture passages today are like that, they are sweet music that lift us up out of the tyranny of the everyday, the injustice of the world, and the monotony of the mundane, and they say, "Behold, Here is your God! Jesus of Nazareth. He has not forgotten you! He is present! He is active, and he will return in power to claim that which is his own and make all things right!" He will surprise us with his grace, sustain us with his power and lead us with his love. May we all take the time not only this Advent season, but all year round, to ponder the painting of God's grand design, listen to the music of his unquenchable love for us, and live in the light of his great promises towards us.

As the writer of 2 Peter says, "Let us grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen."