

*“Got Hunger?”*

*Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 11:2-11*

*December 15, 2013*

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The “Got milk?” ads of the American Dairy Association spawned a plethora of imitators and the title of this message is no exception.

“Got hunger?” We should. It’s Advent.

Advent is about waiting. Not passively, but actively, expectantly. Still, waiting can make us hungry, or hungrier, for that for which we are waiting.

Most of us have childhood memories, or know afresh this year through children and grandchildren, of the sense of expectancy in these days before Christmas. I still remember the Christmas when my older brother was 12, I was six, and we wanted new bicycles. We hoped and languished in what seemed an unending wait.

Yet the longest wait was not the weeks of dreaming before, but the wee hours before the dawn. I remember lying in bed wide awake well before the sun rose on Christmas morning, wanting but not daring to move lest, not finding the bicycles our Christmas hopes would be dashed; or finding them we might, by our commotion, incur the groggy wrath of our benefactors.

Who among us has not known that exquisite delay, when we so anxiously desired to see what package might have *our* name on it under the tree, but dared not move before 6 a.m., or until a parent was out of bed, or until we could smell the coffee, or whatever other signal telegraphed that Christmas joy could begin?

Got hunger? If you don’t have that kind, it’s certain your kids or grandkids do!

Of course, some of our hungers are manufactured. Who buys a “Chi-chi-chi-Chia” or a Clapper at any other time of year but this one? Yet many more hungers—for a living wage, for peace among families and nations, for health restored, for acceptance of and by the neighbor who is different—are at the center of our lives.

Today’s scriptures remind us just how hungry we are. Isaiah 35 reminds us we’re not there yet, that there are still desert places like violence, sorrow, famine and war. There are still desert places in our own lives where springs of water need to flow because we feel empty and dry and worn out. We have broken bodies and bones, broken promises and dashed possibilities, and we are weary and hungry.

I confess there are times when I have to make another hospital call or bury another saint and I grow impatient for that day when there will be, as scripture promises, “no more pain or crying or tears anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Don’t you? Advent draws us into the promises of faith that stimulates our hunger for God’s kingdom. It’s lying in bed hoping there’s a bike in the living room and waiting for morning to come. I hope you and I are not so filled with our activities celebrating the first Christmas—Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem—that we lose our hunger for the second Christmas, the Kingdom of God here and when we will be forever with the Lord.

That second hunger was what drove John’s questioning of Jesus in today’s Gospel. John was hungry for the kingdom all his life. He stood courageously, calling for people to change. In last week’s reading he called the respectable people—the church people and leaders—a “brood of vipers” because of their indifference to the religious values they represented. Ouch!

An irony of faith is that it magnifies our hunger for God. “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven” we pray. We want it to be so. We know what God can do. We know God is victorious on the cross and we cry out in our distress

the ancient Advent prayer, “Come, Lord Jesus.” We remember Jesus’ promises, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled*” and “*Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God*” and we see that our world is not there yet and we cry out with the Psalmist “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” (Ps. 13)

John the Baptist’s hunger is sharp. He’s prophesied the coming of Messiah all his life. But now he’s unsure if Jesus is the Messiah he looked for: “*Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?*” John knows he doesn’t have much time to find out. He is in prison under King Herod for telling him he shouldn’t have married who he married. Beheading soon followed.

Because of John’s clear, passionate vision of the Kingdom; because he can almost taste it; because he is in prison and life is short, he is impatient. Are you the one, Jesus, or not? And we who long for the Kingdom, impatient for the day when justice and righteousness shall rule, hang on every word of Jesus’ reply.

Which is, first, that he does not condemn but commends John for his passion: “*Verily I say unto you: among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist...*” (vs. 11) God help us if we fill our Advent hunger with spiritual junk food and stop looking for his coming. In a culture where Christmas merchandising starts in the summer, as the Confirmation class recently reminded me, we need to keep an edge on our hunger. God can’t fill what isn’t empty. Like John, we need to hunger for the Kingdom by remembering what it looks like.

Second, Jesus refocuses John’s vision of Messiah. John not only had a clear and correct vision of the Kingdom, but a clear vision of Messiah: “*[The Messiah] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*” (Matt. 3:11b-12, NRSV)

But Jesus says, in essence, quit going for the burn and look for signs of the messianic age: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Our community's children yearn for a Christmas morning, and gifts from this church support Boys' and Girls' Village.

Our world groans under the weight of human misery, and the Alternative Giving catalog by our Missions Committee provides an opportunity to make a difference.

Our remembrance of the murders at Sandy Hook a year ago is tempered by the Sandy Ground Project, 26 playgrounds where, as Ann Nyberg of News Channel 8 remarks, "*children can just be children.*" And we give thanks for the time and talent by so many adults last night for our own children and youth as the Sunday School children portrayed the story of God's entering the world and our Methodist Youth Fellowship raised funds for mission.

Our ache for a truly-inclusive church motivates us to sign the Covenant of Conscience, welcoming all people to our church regardless of sexual orientation or identity.

Our desire to witness to the wider community means we build a crèche this morning after worship and represent the Nativity tableau for the 38<sup>th</sup> year of the "Living Creche."

And countless hours, invested by countless people, give our congregation and community Christmas services intended to deepen our hunger for the Kingdom of the Christ Child.

Here it is, John, Brian, church. When you hunger to the point of discouragement, look at what God has done as well as what remains to be done. The Kingdom may not have arrived with all its fullness, but God is at work now. Don't miss what *has* changed because of what *hasn't* changed.

Got hunger? Pursue God's yearnings and you will be filled.