

Advent 1

Isaiah 64:1-9
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37



*God beyond time, help us to live in the tension
between what you have done and
what you will do, and into the truth
that Christ will come again.*

Amen.

by Elizabeth Eaton

THE BURPEE SEED CATALOGUE is the epitome of beauty, grace and proportion. Its pages display the Platonic ideal of which my garden is a poor reflection. Leafing through the catalog I have been beguiled by images of perfect vegetables and beautiful flowers.

I remember my first encounter, my first brush with the excitement and danger of the Burpee's catalog, a phone and a credit card. It was the page with the fields of lavender. I could turn our Columbus, Ohio house into Provence! But the fact that our lot was small enough to mow the lawn with a weed whacker brought me back from the abyss. I decided to order tulip bulbs instead.

Tulip bulbs must be planted in the fall. (They also must be planted right side up I discovered, but that is another story.) We all know how autumn is in the parish: the start-up of Sunday School, choir rehearsals and committee meetings. I didn't plant in September or October.

Finally, toward the end of November, I took my tulip bulbs, bone meal and trowel and set out to transform the backyard. Soil in Ohio is often clay. It was cold. It was raining. It was muddy. My husband would look out the back window and shake his head. After a while even the dog left me. By the time I had finished it was dark and the backyard was a soupy, lumpy, clay-ey mess. But all I could see were rows of brilliant red tulips warmed in the spring sun.

Advent is an odd season. It isn't culturally accessible. It doesn't lend itself to retail. There are no made-for-TV movies telling heartwarming stories about the great and terrible day of the Lord. It is an unsettled season that holds in tension the now and the not yet, longing and hope, judgment and redemption. This is clear in the readings for the First Sunday in Advent.

In Isaiah, the people of Israel are languishing in Babylon. The nation had been defeated, the Temple destroyed, Jerusalem sacked and the people forced into exile. Israel had experienced the liberating power of God in the Exodus. Israel was waiting to be set free from exile in Babylon by God with that same power. The people are pleading with God, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at your presence” (Isaiah 64:1). They were caught between the first Exodus and waiting for the second exodus, this time out of Babylon.

In Mark, Jesus tells his disciples that the Son of Man will come in clouds with great power and glory. “Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mark 13:27). But Jesus does not give a timeline. To his disciples, to the early church, to us, Jesus is not talking so much about *here* as about *near*.

We have celebrated the first Christmas. We know that the babe in the manger grew to adulthood, inaugurated the new age of the reign of God and was crucified. We are on the other side of the first Easter, the resurrection, the triumph over sin and death. We confess, “Christ has died. Christ is risen.” But we find ourselves in the muddy, lumpy mess of a fallen world.

Scripture tells us that “God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). We have heard Jesus’ promise from the cross to the criminal: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). And yet we live in a world still marred by sin. What a terrible tension: we stand between two Edens, the one at the dawn of creation and the one at the close of the age.

Now we can see the beautiful logic of Advent. Where the culture (and my heart, too, if I am honest) celebrates and holds on to the manger and the star, the shepherds and wise

men, to Mary and Joseph and the Christ child, the church calls us to look for the return of the King. Advent deepens the tension between what the world was created to be and what it now is, between what God has done and what God will do.

To our muddy, soupy, lumpy mess — when we walked in darkness — God sent God’s midnight Son. Because of Emmanuel, God with us, we can stand in our clay and see glory. Advent is the season when we can say, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. *Christ will come again.*”

In the meantime, we plant tulips and wait for spring.



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A series of Advent devotions prepared by the leaders of
Anglican and Lutheran churches in full communion