

Father Michael Renninger
2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B
December 6, 2020

It happened just the other day. I was doing some paperwork. Then my phone rang, and I had to get up from my desk to answer it.

After a brief conversation, I sat back down at my desk. And that's when I realized – I couldn't find my glasses.

No problem. I got up and retraced my steps.

I looked all around the room. No glasses. I looked on the desk and under the desk. No glasses.

And just as I started to get angry at myself, I realized that the glasses I had been looking for... were on the top of my head.

I had spent ten minutes looking for something that I already had!

Have you ever had that experience?

Here's another story. Year ago, a friend of mine came into town for a conference. We agreed to meet in a hotel lobby at 6:00. This was back in the days before cell phones.

I got to the hotel and sat down. At 6:00 I started to watch the lobby carefully, looking for my friend. At 6:30, I began to worry that something had happened to my friend.

At 7:00, a hotel employee walked up to me and asked, "Are you Reverend Michael?"

I shook my head, and the employee said, "your friend is here."

I said, "That's impossible. He told me to meet him in the lobby, and I've been here for an hour."

The employee smiled and said, "Sir this is a very large hotel, and we have two lobbies. Your friend is here but he's in the other lobby."

I had been waiting for someone who was already there.
I was looking for someone who had already arrived.

Or, like my eyeglasses, I was looking for something that I already had.

In the Christian tradition, the celebration of the Incarnation of Christ – that is, Christ taking flesh in our world – happens at Christmas. And that celebration is preceded by four weeks of watching, waiting, hoping, praying. We call it Advent.

But our Advent waiting is the kind of waiting and watching I was doing in that hotel. We are waiting for someone who is already here. We are waiting for Christ, who is present here and now by the gift of the Holy Spirit!

The Advent scriptures tell us to watch, to look, but - like my eyeglasses - we are looking for something we already have. The one who saves us is already in our midst – through his word, his sacraments, his community of faith, his Spirit breathing within us. And two Sundays ago, we heard that savior we're looking for is right in front of our eyes, in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the ill, the imprisoned. What you do for them, you do for me.

“Advent” is a Latin word which means “coming” or ‘arrival’. Advent calls us to focus on the ways that Christ comes to our world.

We know that he came to us at Christmas, born of Mary, greeted by Magi. Christ has already come.

And, we know that he is coming again, in glory. The Scriptures assure us that he is coming again, to settle accounts and reveal the truth.

And, Christ is present in your life and mine right now, each day.

The coming one is already here. So perhaps we can ask ourselves an Advent question: Am I in the right lobby? In other words, have I been paying attention to where the Lord is, here and now?

We might be surprised that the One who feels so far off at times is actually as close to us as the glasses on our head!

The people of ancient Israel were looking for God, hoping that God would come soon, to heal them and bring them home.

For centuries, the prophets of ancient Israel called God’s people to be faithful, to be just, to be holy. The prophets warned that our actions have consequences – not just in some future judgement, but here and now.

The prophets reminded God’s CHOSEN people that they were called to be a HOLY people. Yet, so often, God’s people chose selfishness, injustice, unfaithfulness.

They ignored the needs of the poor, while congratulating themselves on their piety. They walked past the widow and orphan. They failed to welcome the stranger. At times, they ran their businesses dishonestly. They ran their marriages dishonestly. They worshipped false gods. Some sought power. Few sought holiness.

The prophets warned that the unfaithfulness of God’s people would lead to disaster. And about 6 centuries before the birth of Jesus, disaster happened.

The Babylonians conquered ancient Israel. Jerusalem was captured. The temple destroyed. The people carried off to exile in a foreign land.

Everything they counted on was taken away, leaving the people of Israel to wonder, “Where is God? Will God ever help us? How long must we wait until God comes and takes us home?”

They prayed, they pleaded, they watched. And... they suffered the confusion that happens when the world as you know it gets turned upside down, and all the things that used to give you strength are ripped from your grasp.

Maybe WE know a bit of how that feels? After all, since the arrival of COVID, haven't we been living in a confusing world? Doesn't it feel like the world as we knew it has been turned upside down?

Aren't you missing the things that used to give you strength? Like... A stress-free trip to church, the fellowship of your bible study group, a dinner out with a friend, a hug from your grandchild.

These things have been taken away from many of us. During this, our COVID exile, do you ever wonder, “Where is God? When will God come and set things right? How long must we wait? Will we ever get back to normal?” which is another way of saying, “will we ever get home again?”

Where are you, Lord?

The people of Israel were experiencing a heartbreakingly painful exile. Then God speaks a word through Isaiah the prophet. And what is that word?

“Comfort.”

It's the first word of today's passage from the Prophet Isaiah.

Comfort. Give comfort to my people, says your God.

Isaiah goes on – speak tenderly to Jerusalem and say, your sins are forgiven.

Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain made low. And the glory of the lord shall be revealed.

You can almost feel the hope of God's people beginning to rise up within them. And yet, you couldn't blame them for asking, “When will this happen. Where should we look to find the one who brings comfort, and hope?”

When is it coming? Where is this God?

But if we keep listening, I think Isaiah tells us that the One who will heal us... is already here.

In verse 9, we hear this: “Go up to a high mountain, lift up your voice. Say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God!”

HERE is your God.

Not just in some wonderful future, but – right now – HERE is your God!

The shepherd who gathers us in his arms and carries us home... is here. The people were already in his arms. So are we.

Yes, the people of Israel had lost so much. Yes, their world was confusing and strange. God felt far away.

But... the God who saves had not gone anywhere. The PEOPLE had wandered away from God... but the Lord was with them, In the suffering, IN their exile. God was already with them.

Isaiah reveals that God is already at work, and is making it possible for the people to experience the joy of homecoming.

They were looking for a Lord who was already there.
Their comforting God was as close as the top of their heads.

When John the Baptizer appears in the wilderness east of Jerusalem, he announces that one more powerful than he is coming – the one who would baptize us in the holy spirit. That one is coming, John says.

In preparation for his coming, John tells us to repent – change our minds, change our ways, do justice. We must confess our sins and receive the baptism of repentance. Why? Because he is coming.

But even as John told them to get ready for the Messiah’s coming – they didn’t quite realize that the Messiah was already here. He had been in their midst for 30 years. Living up in Nazareth, with Mary and Joseph. The savior, whose coming was announced by John, was already in the neighborhood! Maybe they didn’t see him because he looked so... ordinary. So human. So here.

Many people in our world wonder – “where is God, and when is God coming to straighten out this mess?” While we wait, we strive to serve the Lord by serving our neighbors.

But Isaiah’s Advent promise calls us not to live in the past, when God came to us in Bethlehem; nor to live in a far-off future, when the Lord will come again.

Isaiah’s promise of comfort is a proclamation of God’s presence today. “Here is your God,” Isaiah says. “Right here. Right now. Put your hand on top of your head. That’s how close God is. And that brings me... comfort.

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