

Exposed and waiting: Psalm 146; Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

by [Rosalind Brown](#) in the [December 2, 1998](#) issue

There's a phrase tucked away in Psalm 146 that provides the basis for our Advent hope: God "keeps his promise forever." Without that assurance there is no hope and no sense in Advent. Our hope is in God. The psalm underlines that conviction, as the confident prayer for the king of last week's psalm suddenly gives way to the disappointed voice of bitter experience: "Put not your trust in rulers, not in any child of earth, for there is no hope in them."

The psalmist's words probably test John as he languishes in prison at Herod's behest. He knows there is no hope in Herod. But is God keeping his promise? What has happened to the glorious vision of Isaiah, where the eyes of the blind are opened, the deaf are unstopped, the lame leap and the tongue of the dumb sings for joy? What about his own bold proclamation of the coming of the messiah? We don't know exactly what provokes John's question to Jesus, but this faithful prophet, who once recognized that he needed to be baptized by Jesus, is now face-to-face with his doubts and disappointments. Jesus is apparently not the messiah he anticipated. John is forced to reexamine the basis of his hope.

When Jesus responds to John by asking his disciples to tell what they see and hear, and to dare to hold that alongside the promises of Isaiah, he leaves out the part of Isaiah 61 that refers to the prisoners being freed. Can John recognize in what his disciples see and hear that this is indeed the messiah, even if he does not set this particular prisoner free? Can John be trusted not to take offense at this messiah? After all, Jeremiah was rescued from a well. Why not John from a prison?

John's story challenges us to live with hope in the face of disappointment and disorientation. Is our fidelity intentional or situational? How do we understand our stories in the light of God's story when the two don't seem to touch, when there is an elusiveness to God's ways with us? Can we step outside the parameters we put on our expectations, letting God strengthen our weak hands and feeble knees, hearing in our fearful hearts the call to be strong, not to be afraid, because our God is coming?

God seems to specialize in turning things upside down. In Isaiah 34 God ruins the glory of the nations, turning fertile places into deserts inhabited by a zoo of wild animals who fill the air with a cacophony of noise. Their stench and the raucous noise are almost tangible, and the awful desolation should shock our senses and appall us. But no sooner is this doom pronounced than Isaiah speaks of the wilderness not simply in bloom but singing for joy. Almost phrase by phrase, Isaiah 35 undoes the devastation of the previous chapter: the place that no one passes through becomes a well-trodden highway. Burning sand becomes a pool, and fertile vegetation replaces the sterility of sulfur-ridden soil.

God is the God of both situations. The abundance is no more a sign of God's presence than the desolation, since God can switch them at will. We tend to measure God's presence in any situation by our sense of well-being, and fail to recognize that disturbance in our lives is often a sign of God's activity. Can we manage to stay put in the place of ambiguity or paradox long enough to discover that God is indeed there also, so that we echo Jacob's awed words, "God was in this place and I, I did not know it"?

My Sierra Club calendar reminds me that "nowhere else on earth is geologic time so exposed as in a desert." Nowhere else is God's time so exposed in our lives as in a desert experience: out of control of all that shapes our lives, we are open to God's timescale, God's ways. Like John in prison, we discover--willingly or not--how to be patient until the coming of the Lord. As Welsh poet and priest R. S. Thomas writes (in "Waiting for It"):

Now
in the small hours
of belief the one eloquence

to master is that
of the bowed head, the bent
knee, waiting, as at the end

of a hard winter
for one flower to open
on the mind's tree of thorns.

If we can be quiet in our hearts long enough, we will discover that God still carves out highways and turns the wilderness into a place of wonder, life and beauty, even though nothing is as we expected.

But any transformation of the wilderness depends on water. Throughout the Old Testament God is spoken of as the one who gives or withholds water--an image easily understood by people for whom water is a precious and uncontrolled commodity. Today, piped water deprives us of an image of God as the one on whom our very existence depends; similarly, electricity deludes us into thinking we have the dark under our control. Together they rob us of daily experiences that could add vibrancy to the Advent invitation to revisit our dependence on God, to revisit our desire for God and to discover through the night of waiting that God does indeed come.

Could John, despite his disappointments, hold on to the longing and the waiting that are at the heart of Advent's disturbing message and discover in their midst the mystery of God's presence--mystery to be lived into, not explained? Mystery that transforms rather than simply informs? Advent faces us with the same question: Dare we risk exploring the meaning of our longing for God?