

Sermon preached by
The Reverend William J. Eakins
at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
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"Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us." So begins the collect for this Third Sunday of Advent. It is a prayer of longing, expectation and confidence that God can and will act to help and deliver us. But how often do we say such a prayer and really mean it?

To be sure, there are times when we are at the end of our rope, when the problems in our lives or in the world round us overwhelm us, when we feel that all our efforts are helpless and hopeless. Then we may cry out "O God, save me" or "God, help us!" But do we then believe that God indeed hears us and will act to deliver us?

The promises of Scripture often seem too good to be true. Is this "the year of the Lord's favor," as the prophet Isaiah proclaims? Is God working to turn mourning into joy, restore broken cities and restore ancient ruins, and "cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations?" Is God present and powerful, as the Psalmist declares, to do "great things for us?" Maybe such promises are wishful thinking, we wonder, as we read the newspaper or listen to the news we consider the realities of our own lives. Why are our problems and the world's problems so persistent? Maybe God does not care about us as much as we have been told. Or maybe God does not have any power to help us worth stirring up.

One of the reasons why we are slow to believe that God can and will act to answer our prayers is that we are impatient. We want instant action when we cry to God for help. So when God does not act according to our timetable, we conclude that our prayers have been in vain. But God does not calculate time the way we do: "With the Lord, one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day." So when God does not appear to be hearing, let alone answering our prayers, it may very well be that God's response will just take longer to work out than we imagine.

Another of our difficulties in prayer is that we often have a preconceived notion of what God's saving action will look like. When matters don't turn out according to our game plan – when our ideal job or ideal partner does not materialize, when our children or our life circumstances do not measure up to our expectations – we are disappointed and suppose that God does not care about us, is absent, or is ineffectual. We can then become so blind and deaf, so trapped within our disappointment that we are unable to recognize the saving work that God may be doing right under our noses.

Consider the trouble that the religious folk of Jesus' day had in recognizing the Messiah, God's Promised One, when he came among them. Yes, they had prayed for God to act and save them. But their expectation of what that salvation would look like was a military leader who would drive the Romans out and restore the political and economic fortunes of Israel. No wonder Jesus took them by surprise and caused consternation: he just didn't look like any Messiah they were expecting.

I remember a time of shattered dreams and deep despair in my own life. It was during the breakdown of my first marriage, a nightmare that I had never imagined would happen to us. How often I prayed then, "O God, stir up your power and come among us! Help and deliver us!" But my prayers seemed to fall on deaf ears. Nothing happened as I wanted. Our marriage and our family seemed to fall inexorably apart. Devastation and desolation were all around me. Why were my prayers not answered? I didn't know then, and I don't know today.

But one thing I can say. God did not save my former marriage but God certainly acted to save me. I am filled with awe and gratitude at the new life and new love that God gave me some years later in a wonderful woman appropriately named Hope. The words of today's Psalm aptly describe the experience of God's blessing that has been ours during the past 21 years of our marriage.

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion
then were we like those who dream
then was our mouth filled with laughter
and our tongues with shouts of joy.

Could it be that the tears of helplessness and despair needed to be sown in order to reap the songs of joy? Or is it simply that God's love and power are such that God is always able to transform our weeping into laughter? I don't know.

What I do know is that God does hear our prayers and is able to answer them far beyond what we can ask for or imagine. What we need to do in our praying is to empty ourselves of our own timetables and our own agendas and to trust God. It is the Good News of Advent that it is precisely in such emptying and trusting that God comes. It was so for Mary, who humbled herself to bear the Savior, and so it will be for us.

Some time ago in this very season, I visited a young couple in their home the day before their first child was born. It had been a difficult pregnancy with anxiety over the health of the expected infant. The Christmas tree was trimmed with lights and decorations in anticipation of Christmas. But on the chair by the door there was also a little patchwork quilt made by one of the grandmothers. The name of the expected baby was already stitched upon it, and next to the Christmas tree stood an empty cradle waiting for the baby to fill it.

Advent is the season of expectant preparation for God's coming among us not just in the Christ Child born long ago in Bethlehem but also into our own lives here and now. God's coming is always a gift – unearned, surprising, rich with blessings beyond compare. The way to receive the gift is to empty ourselves of our pride and self-sufficiency, our impatience and our pre-occupations and to watch and pray with eager longing. And God will do the rest.