

## Where Is God?

Read: Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, Mark 13:24-37

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. I want to ask you to raise your hands if you know what Advent is? I know that is a silly question, but there are some denominations and religious traditions that don't recognize Advent. What is Advent? Advent is a time of waiting, a time of preparing, a time of expectation. But waiting for what? The stores to open at 4 am so we can be the first one to get that \$349 laptop at Best Buy? Is it a time to prepare those cakes, pies, and special dishes to put in the freezer for that big Christmas dinner? Is it time to buy those expensive gifts to meet those expectations under the Christmas tree on Christmas morning? I don't think that is what is meant exactly by waiting, preparing, and expecting.

The Presbyterians sponsor a conference in summer every year at Montreat for worship and music. They have created a book called "Christ Be Our Light" from this conference. This book describes Advent in this way: "Advent begins a time of hushed expectation, a time of vibrant, trembling darkness." This is an interesting description of advent. It goes on to say "For the church it is a time to stop and be aware of the darkness, to hear the cries of the suffering world, to see where everything is going wrong in our lives, a time to change the liturgical color to purple, a time to be penitent and to pray fervently: "Oh Come Lord, come." These images don't really give us a happy feeling. Our scripture from Isaiah and from the Psalms don't really give us a happy feeling either. They prompt us to look at the question "Where is God?"

I am going to focus our message this morning on the scripture from Isaiah, chapter 64, verses 1-9. Looking at when this scripture was set, sometime during the Babylonian conquest (586 BCE) and prior to the rebuilding of the temple in (515 BCE), the Israelites were probably really frustrated. They were in this foreign country, their temple had been destroyed, they hadn't seen any sign of God. So they send up this prayer, this lament. A lament is a style of prayer that has certain sections. This is part of the lament that we find here. The typical pattern is to address God, a complaint, a request for help, and affirmation of confidence in God, and an assertion of innocence or confession of sin. The psalm we read is also a lament. Our passage in Isaiah lays for the part of the lament that is their complaint that God has been hiding from them and a request for God to help.

They feel as though because they have sinned, God has hidden from them. They ask “Where are you God?” or “Where is God?” In the Psalm scripture, while there isn’t an admission of sin, there is a plea for God to come and to restore and to save them. The psalmist also asks “Where is God?” These are interesting scriptures to struggle with here on the first Sunday of advent.

So what do the Israelites plea “Where is God?” have to do with us and with mankind throughout time? Last Sunday, as you worshipped here, our youth were at the Virginia Holocaust Museum in Richmond. After some complaints about going, we did experience this great museum. The first thing we did was to listen to a video where Holocaust survivors told their stories. We saw very graphic pictures of people killed, starved, and taken away to slaughter like cattle. Those who spoke on the film repeatedly said “G-d, where are you?” or “Where was G-d in all of this?” They asked that question and as we experienced that museum, we had to wonder where God was for this chosen people.

Kate Huey, in her commentary on this scripture says that both scriptures for this week are written in the midst of the suffering of their people. She says “God’s own people, Israel. ‘Where are you, God? Why don’t you act to fix this awful situation? Why don’t you come down and make things right? Where is God now?’” She goes on to say “Readers of *Night* Elie Wiesel’s classic account of his youth spent in a concentration camp, surely hear echoes of that same question, asked by the inmates forced to watch the ordeal of a child, a ‘sad-eyed angel’ hanged by the Nazis for being a spy. *Where is God now?*” (Sermon Seeds, p 1-2)

In our present day situation with the economy, rising unemployment, lack of healthcare benefits, more folks needing help than ever before, we want to know “Where is God?” Just this week, *The Daily Times News* featured an article about those who are used to being the ones giving to Christmas Cheer are now the ones asking for help. We want to ask as we go through these daily struggles, “Where is God?”

The holiday season is to be a time of joy and happiness but often results in depression and suicide. Just this weekend there was a shooting in a Toys R Us in California. There was a Wal Mart employee who was trampled to death. Not signs of good cheer and we ask “Where is God?”

In a land of plenty, we tend to feel sorry for ourselves when we don't have as much money coming in from our 401K's or our stock dividends, where there are those in our community and in our world who have no home, no car, no job, and do not know where their next meal is coming from. We want to ask "Where is God in our situation?" but we should be asking "Where is God for others who are much less fortunate?"

Bruce Epperly in his commentary on this scripture says: "Process Theologians assert that God is present in each moment as the source of adventure, possibility, and creativity...Not all moments are equally inspirational and life-transforming: more are ordinary and all to many moments are tragic." He goes on to say "In the wake of the ongoing economic recession, many persons will feel a divine absence during Advent and Christmas. They may not hang Christmas lights, send card, or buy expensive gifts. For some it will feel like winter, with no Christmas in sight. Having identified God with consumerism and prosperity, economic scarcity may appear to be a sign of God's judgment, withdrawal, or loss of jolly materialistic Christmas spirit...God's "hide and seek" can inspire us to value what is truly important during the Christmas season—relationships, simplicity of heart, care for the least of these, awareness of God locally and globally." (Process Faith and Theology, p 1)

So what is the good news in this text today? We are in the advent season. This is a time of waiting, preparing, expecting God to come but what are doing to prepare for that expectation? We lit the candle of Hope this morning. What is our hope? Our hope is to experience God. Patricia de Jong writes: "At Advent, God's people summon the courage and the spiritual strength to remember that the holy breaks into the daily." (Feasting the Word, p 6)

Epperly puts it this way: "The experience of the divine absence is real as we struggle with preserving retirement plans, face the challenge of aging, chronic or life-threatening illness; personal depression; the perils of climate change; and the eclipse of the American Empire. These experiences of absence should not be denied. The cry of absence is essential to spiritual integrity. ...but there is another voice; the cry is an act of hope on our part, and stronger than we believe, we have the spiritual gifts in our personal and community lives that will enable us to live faithfully and lovingly even when we struggle to experience God's presence.

So I ask you, do you ever ask “Where is God?” or “Where are you, God?” If so, you are not alone. We all have asked that sometime in our lives. Some of us ask it more frequently than others. Sometimes we just have to listen for God’s voice. I challenge you to listen for the sound of God’s voice, or to witness the work of God’s hand. God’s voice may come through a friendly phone call from someone who just called to say they care. It may be through a random act of kindness like someone you don’t know buying you a cup of coffee. It may through the purchasing of gifts to be put in shoeboxes to send to children in other countries or through the taking of an ornament to purchase a gift for a Christmas Cheer family. These are all the ways that God’s voice can be heard, or God’s hands can be seen.

As we listen for God’s voice communicating to us through us, we too must be God’s hands and God’s voice as we go out into this world to answer the call of someone who is asking “Where is God?”

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