

*God, Can You Hear Us?*

Advent 1B

PPC

29 November 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9

13:24-37

My visit to Jerusalem three years ago coincided with the anniversary of the 1967 war with Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. The Six Day War as it is known showed Israel to be a powerful military force in the mid-East. Israel acquired territory at the time that had not been part of the 1948 outline of the state and it took over all of Jerusalem. Today, in the old city, you can still see places where Israeli soldiers shot through doors and walls to take ownership of the entire city.

On the day we visited the “wailing wall”, or the western wall which is the last vestige standing of the Second Temple, there were military personnel everywhere. We disembarked from our bus just as many official buses were disgorging hundreds of soldiers fully armed. It was an unsettling feeling to be surrounded by such weaponry and so many soldiers, male and female. We made our way through them to go the entrance of the wall where we saw many other pilgrims praying and weeping at this sacred monument.

When it was my turn to go up to the wall, I was surprised by my reaction, as I, too, began to weep. There are cracks in the wall where previous sojourners had placed their small, written missives holding their prayers. I had come prepared and so I wrote my prayer and stuck it into a crevice in the wall. Standing before a structure that held so much history was an overwhelming experience. This wall has been a witness to many prayers. We were told that each week rabbis come to collect these prayers and then take them to pray over them.

Even as I wept, though, I was thinking of the thousands of years this wall had been witness to people's greatest prayers. How many of them, I wondered, were answered. I don't remember what I prayed for but even as I stood with so many at that wall, I felt connected to something larger than myself.

Is God hiding when we need God the most?

Although the details of Israel's situation differ from those of our nation, there is a deep similarity between our existential conditions. We know that our reliance upon our massive, ruthless political power, rather than the pursuit of justice, has brought us to a crisis. We would depend on military power alone to make the mountains quake and other nations tremble. We are again in the midst of despair as this COVID 19 rages out of control because too many of us don't care about others.

Third Isaiah writes at a time when the exiles in Babylon have begun to return to the destruction of Jerusalem that has been left for almost 70 years. After having spent so much time in a prosperous and lush city of greenery and water, they straggle slowly back to a city that is barren and ruined. Those who have stayed behind probably aren't all that excited to see the exiles return. For thousands of years these inhabitants of Judah have been told that they are the chosen people of God, that God will never abandon them. When they see before them the destruction and rot of their beloved city, the Temple where their God used to dwell, it's no wonder that Isaiah talks to them about the "hidden God". Gone are their notions of God belonging to them or of their ability to contain God in Jerusalem, let alone the Temple.

Isaiah describes this hidden God in order to deconstruct a distorted set of beliefs and practices. This hidden God who refuses to act powerfully and dramatically

to rescue Israel from its distress is a form of divine judgment. What will it mean to be “God’s people” under these new set of circumstances?

Who hasn’t wondered this same thing? Where is the great Exodus when you need it? Why doesn’t God open up the heavens and destroy the evil that exists? If in biblical times, God intervened in history with “awesome deeds” (64:3), why doesn’t God behave this way today? Surely, there are enough egregious deeds being done here and now to warrant that kind of intervention. Why would God deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt but not deliver six million Jews from Hitler’s death camps? We read stories of God’s spectacular interventions, yet we look in vain for such visible signs. Wouldn’t you love to see the mountains quake and Mt. Rushmore crumble?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a German concentration camp in 1944, dared to draw this conclusion “God would have us know that we must live as men [and women] who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.”

For Bonhoeffer and for those of us listening today, this does not amount to a denial of faith but to a retrieval of faith in the God of the cross, whose power is suffering, whose omnipotence is vulnerability. God doesn’t hide behind a cloak of humility temporarily covering an awesome, powerful glory that is the kind shown by Clark Kent/Superman. God is a reflection of the divine character, a divine determination

to relate to the world through the vulnerable path of non coercive love and suffering service rather than through domination and force. God doesn't change us overnight but rather, like a father, takes the time, like a potter, to shape the clay continually.

If I was to poll the congregation right now, how many of us are wishing hard that God would make the changes to this nation - and to us - that are so needed? We can't help but wish for the justice that we imagine exists only in God's imagination. Isaiah, however, is not a proponent of cheap grace, as Bonhoeffer termed it.

I remember how hard I worked with my children to get them to say "I'm sorry" when they did something hurtful. My son picked this up very quickly and so, whenever he invaded his sister's territory and did something she didn't like, he was quick to say, "I'm sorry." Finally, one day my daughter complained to me that it wasn't right that he thought he could just say "I'm sorry" and everything would be okay. Children can sometimes be our best teachers. Elizabeth learned about cheap grace early on.

Isaiah shows us a God who is angry and silent, one who hides God's face from a people who reject God's righteous ways. Aren't we those people?

You might be thinking, "what a strange way to begin Advent with weeping and lament." And yet, how powerful. This is where we need to begin in these difficult times especially.

With the coming of Advent we, the church, are jolted out of ordinary time with the invasive news that it's time to think about the fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness. The promise of peace, shalom/salaam is at the heart of the promise born at Advent. It is difficult to arrive there, though, without becoming vulnerable first. It is difficult to be on this journey toward Bethlehem without repentance and forgiveness.

When we look back at this year, it hard not to weep. For the number of black lives that were taken by a system of policing that is life-denying. When I think back at my own ancestors who arrived on these shores in hopes of owning land and making a life they would never have achieved in England, I must also see how they brought the end of life to the people who already inhabited this land. We are living in a time of broken-heartedness. We are going to have to start telling the truth about who we are. This is frightening to many people who don't want to deconstruct the story of history they love. Like those Judeans returning to a ghost city, though, we find ourselves in a nation that is no longer recognizable to any of us. How can we build a place where all who live here feel valued and loved?

We have such a yearning for God to make everything right again. Are we being punished for our iniquities? One commentator wrote that our country has changed over the past years from one that wants to **be** good to one that wants to **feel** good. The truth of this may be evident in the number of people, who against the medical advice, chose to travel to be with extended family this Thanksgiving. It is visible in the number of people who, starting on Black Friday, rush from store to store searching for the things that will bring them happiness and fulfillment.

Peace, the kind of peace that we are hungering for, will not come from trying to fill ourselves up with material things. Read *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* to learn this! We try to stem our hurt and pride by running away from pain and caring only about what is ours. Selfishness will not take away those feelings of hurt.

Instead, we need to remember that the first word of Advent is “hope”. Hope is what is left when your worst fears have been realized and you are no longer optimistic about the future. Hope is what comes with a broken heart willing to be mended.

Advent reminds us that God does break into the world in the ordinary, in the arrival of a child. That child brings the promise of peace, hope, and restored life. We are asked to summon the courage and the spiritual strength to recognize the ways that God breaks into our lives. For the sound of the waves breaking against the shore, for the unexpected sight of a cardinal, for the exuberance of a puppy, for the glow that spreads through your body when a loved one smiles at you.

Advent is also not a season for passively waiting. It is a season for weeping and wailing, of opening our lives and our souls with active anticipation and renewed hope. As the days grow shorter and the darkness descends, Advent is a time when we keep our eyes on the light that will not disappear. When we sing, “Let There Be Peace on Earth and let it begin with me...”

Each one of us is given a candle to hold on Christmas Eve with the admonition to carry it into the darkness and be the light. We burn brightly with the hope of the prophets and the courage of the gospels. We know that the holy broke into the ordinary, flooding us with hope and making us strong so that even when God is silent we know what to do. We do not lose heart; rather we live with our hearts broken open so that God can find a way in.

Leonard Cohen wrote:

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in.