

Fellowship@10 – Holy Communion

Sunday, December 3, 2023- 1st Sunday in Advent, Year B

Texts: Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

Theme: Naming Where We Are

Introduction

The relentless war in Ukraine.

Unspeakable violence in Israel and Gaza.

Blistering wildfires in western Australia.

The rising cost of living and homelessness, significant overrepresentation of First Nations people in the criminal justice system and climate change policy and impacts.

As we approach our next liturgical season and a new Church year, we find ourselves, once again, in a world that threatens to overwhelm us. Many of us are bewildered, weary, lamenting, fearful, and exhausted. Troubled (if we're honest), by the question "good Christians" are often too afraid to ask:

Where is God? Is God hiding?

Fortunately for us, the Biblical writers we meet in the lectionary this week do not share our reticence in naming where we are and lamenting God's hidden-ness.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," cries Isaiah in our Old Testament reading for this first Sunday of the season.

"Restore us, O Lord of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved," pleads the Psalmist.

"The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken," says Jesus in Mark's Gospel, describing a state of godless disaster.

I wish I didn't recognize in the world around me.

What an odd way to usher in Advent.

What a bizarre way to shout, "Happy New Year, Church!"

Is this really where we're supposed to begin on the first Sunday of Advent?

By naming the elephant in the room so explicitly? So bluntly?

So directly? Has God gone missing?

When was the last time you felt the absence of God?

How to hold on to faith, keep trusting, keep hoping and rediscover joy when God seems silent, slow, unfair, indifferent, or missing.

According to the week's readings, we enter this first season of the Christian New Year — if we dare enter it at all — in lamentation. Eschewing all forms of denial, polite piety and cheap cheer — "God is good".

I don't know about you most of the time it doesn't help!

Again, what do you do when it feels like God isn't there —

when the state of the world, our own suffering, or the struggles of those we know suggest that God is absent?

When you've experienced soul-crushing silence from heaven,

despite your fervent supplications?

But you know what?

We must allow the radical honesty of Scripture to make us honest, too.

"How long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" asks the Psalmist in desperation.

"Because you hid yourself, we transgressed," cries Isaiah.

During Advent, let's stop posturing and pretending. We quit trying to make God's hiddenness okay. We shed our greeting card assumptions about the Divine. We get real.

"Our world is not okay," is what these Advent readings declare in stark, unflinching terms. God's apparent absence is not fine — it hurts. It hurts so much we can barely breathe from the agony of it. We are surrounded by evil and suffering, we're not sure our faith can endure what our eyes reluctantly witness each day, and though we long for a Saviour to rend the heavens and come down, the very ferocity of that longing is wearying our souls.

Again, I don't know about you, but I am wearied, exhausted, trying my best each day.

Some days it's difficult. Hope itself has become a grind.

However, I believe that **the first gift of Advent** is the permission to tell the truth, even if that truth is laced with sorrow. Laced with pain. We are invited to describe life "on earth as it is," and not as we mistakenly assume our faith requires us to render it.

Into our surrounding cultures of denial and spin, apathy and high living, we are called to speak the whole truth:
we need God.

We need God to show up.

We need God to stay.

We need God to love, hold, deliver, and restore us.

We need to be vulnerable – to cry out to God

We were created for intimacy with a just, gracious, and profoundly compassionate Saviour, and when that intimacy is missing, we suffer.

The second gift of Advent

is less a "gift" than a discipline. It is the discipline of waiting.

During Advent, we live with quiet anticipation in the "not yet."

We stop rushing and decide to call sacred what is yet in-process and unformed.

As Paul puts it in this week's reading from 1st Corinthians, we *"wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

This is no easy task in today's world, which applauds arrivals, finish lines, shortcuts, and end products, far more than it does the meandering journey or odd way station.

If the secular world speeds past darkness to the safe certainty of, then Advent reminds us those necessary things — things worth waiting for — happen in the soft, fertile dark.

To sit and wait for God — not in bitterness, not with cynicism, not in fake and frozen piety — is serious light spiritual work.

But it is the invitation of Advent. To wait.

Thirdly, Advent prepares us

for the God who is coming — a God who will turn out to be very different from the one we expect and maybe even hope to find.

I am always struck by the difference between the Biblical passages we read during Advent, and the ones we shift to when Christmas finally arrives.

This week, Isaiah longs for a Very Big God to do Very Big Things. Recalling the history of the Exodus, he asks God to do “awesome deeds” once again — deeds that will make the mountains quake and the nations tremble. Come to us as fire, he pleads. Fire that kindles and burns, fire that sets the world boiling.

Who among us has not prayed such prayers?

Bring an end to the war in Israel and Gaza.

Protect the refugees.

Spare the children.

Save the weary world!

But why stop there? Why not go further?

Eradicate all illness.

End world hunger.

Root out corruption.

Destroy systemic racism.

Stop corporate greed.

Protect this wounded planet before we ravage it past saving, and most of all shield us, O Lord, from our sinful, self-destructive selves.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

I don't believe I can — or should — stop praying these prayers. God is big, and when I come to God in prayer, dreaming of a just and wholly redeemed world, I know I'm dreaming a tiny version of God's own dream.

During Advent, we are asked to prepare ourselves for something else. Someone else. Someone so unexpected and so small, I'm tempted to either laugh or cry at the thought of him.

The world is falling apart, my heart is exhausted, people are dying, and God chooses to send us ... a baby?

In his sermon entitled, "The Face in the Sky," Frederick Buechner describes the Incarnation as a kind of scandal — one that requires us to ponder the shocking unpredictability of God:

"Those who believe in God can never in a way be sure of him again. Once they have seen him in the stable, they can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths he will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of humankind.

If holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in this least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too."

What are we to make of this?

The God who is limitless chooses limits:
one womb,
one backwater town,
one bygone century,
one brief life,
one agonizing death.

The salvation we long for is not the salvation he brings.
These are not easy or comfortable truths to accept; they're truths
to wrestle with hard and long. Truths to weep over.
Truths to receive with gentleness and care.

Come Christmas, I want to be ready to receive God as God is.
Not as I might wish God to be, or insist God become.
Advent is my time to prepare for the Saviour who is.

So, here we are.

Exactly where we need to be.

Here we are, wrestling with the brokenness of the world and the
hiddenness of our God.

Here we are, voicing our laments and registering our yearnings.

Here we are, waiting.

Here we are, preparing ourselves for the God who is coming.

"Oh, that you would tear the heavens and come down."

This is an honest prayer, and we need not fear it. It's okay to pray
into the silence, the hiddenness, and the absence.

It's okay to struggle with Advent and its complicated gifts.

So pray and wait.

Wait and pray.

Wait, pray.

And hope.

And we pray and we wait in hope.

As much as you can, be patient.

As much as you can, be vulnerable.

As much as you can, be still.

Hope fiercely.

Deep in the gathering dark, something tender is forming.

Something beautiful — something for the world's saving —
waits to be born.

Emmanuel.

God is with us.