

Longing for God – Advent 1 – December 3, 2017

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The lectionary readings for the first Sunday of Advent always take me a little by surprise. You would think that we would hear stories about how Mary was visited by an angel or Joseph learning in a dream that Mary's child would be the Messiah. Or about how old Elizabeth conceived a child after years and years of being barren. Or about how the Roman government decided it was time for a census and everyone had to travel back to their hometowns to be counted.

But no. On the first Sunday of Advent we get an apocalypse. Turmoil in the natural world – earthquakes and fiery eruptions, nations trembling in the presence of God. End times with all the fireworks that come with it. And for those who are followers of God – we're put on notice. Get ready! Keep watch! God is coming into the world and there will be big changes afoot! Be prepared for the end of time, when God's realm will be fully realized, and all peoples will submit to God's reign of justice and might.

You know - most days I could probably do without the drama of the apocalypse. I'm in no hurry for cataclysmic chaos of biblical proportions. But lately, with all the hatred in the world - the violence, the suffering, the exploitation of others. The feeling that situations just keep getting worse. I find myself ready for a bit of end time action.

I think that when we look at our world. Really look at it. And take a moment to comprehend the vast suffering of so many people, it becomes truly overwhelming. The people of Israel were no strangers to suffering. They were on the receiving end of it for much of their existence. So it's no wonder that they perfected the art of lamentation.

The passage from Isaiah is a lament. It comes out of intense grief, extensive loss, or from situations that are completely out of control. To lament is much more than venting one's frustration. It is a cry to God for deliverance in the midst of extreme hopelessness. But within that cry is the belief that God cares about the one praying. That God sees the person or people and understands their pain. And it is a faithful assertion of trusting God whatever the outcome. It is a cry to God, when God seems absent, yet still we have faith that somehow God hears us and will eventually act. Even when things seem so irretrievably terrible, some bit of hope remains, and we believe that God hears our cries.

This passage from Isaiah is an anguished plea for God to act in history on behalf of a powerless people and to bring about redemption. The writer is desperate, living in what seems to be hopeless times, and he begs God to intervene. He speaks on behalf of all the people, crying out "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The situation is miserable, so miserable that God is seen to be far removed from what is occurring. God is

nowhere to be found. In Israel's history, this lament comes out of the period around the time of the Babylonian exile. The nation of Israel was separated from its homeland, living among foreigners, suffering for their sins and alienated from God.

Yet even in their desperation, they could can plead to God to "tear open the heavens and come down." They beg God to bridge the gap that separates them from God. To rip apart that which keeps God so distant. The imagery is both poetic and terrifying. Reminiscent of the appearances of God at Mt Sinai during the Exodus, there are images of earthquakes on the mountain and fire. It is a powerful and sure request for divine intervention for, as the writer acknowledges, no one has ever seen or heard of any God so great. They call for acts beyond the ordinary, as in the time of Moses, when the covenant with Israel was forged. They are looking for the big fireworks display to show the other nations whose God is boss.

By verse 5 however, the lament changes its tone. Suddenly there is a quiet confession of communal guilt. Israel admits its sinfulness and expresses its unseemliness. They take responsibility for their sinfulness, using images of a worthless, dirty cloth and withered leaves blown about to describe how sin has made them unworthy. They long for God's intervention, but realize they have failed to follow God.

This combination of longing and failure illustrates the tension of advent. We yearn for God to break through the barrier, yet our sinfulness is what created the barrier in the first place. We long to be redeemed by grace, yet we our weighed down by the burden of our guilt. We yearn to stand in God's presence, yet are overwhelmed by our sense of unworthiness.

The lament continues with an appeal to the relationship between God and humanity. Consider this, even in our failures, we are still your people. We belong to you and you cannot disown us. Listen to our cry! Rip open the heavens and come down here! We need you. We are your children, and even when we disobey you, you are still responsible for our wellbeing. In these recent times, I imagine that God has received more than a few prayers of lament from around our world.

It does not matter who we are or where we live, none of us is immune to trouble. We are not as self-sufficient as we would like to believe. And as much as we like to think that it's true, we are not in control of our lives. We see in the faces of our neighbors or friends the shocking reality that things can change in an instant. Because hidden beneath the seemingly tough exterior of our existence, we are, each one of us, vulnerable and defenseless. We are all, every one of us, in need of God. And deep within each one of us is a longing for God to come and make things right.

On this first Sunday of Advent we are confronted by the realities of this present world, recognizing that for many it is a harsh and often uncertain place to reside. And so on behalf

of our brothers and sisters around the world, we offer up our communal lament, longing for God to make that final curtain call to set the world straight, once and for all. Our prayers are bathed in hope, trusting Jesus when he said would come again, bringing peace, love and the end of all pain and suffering.

The catch is, we don't know when that will occur. And so we must wait. Though it may seem to be, waiting is not a passive endeavor. From Mark's gospel we hear a strong exhortation for us to keep watch, to remain alert. Christ's coming will be at unexpected time and we are strongly cautioned to not be caught unaware. No one knows when the coming will occur, so we are to live each moment as if it is the last. We are to remain expectant and hopeful, continuing the mission that Christ gave to each of us, that of loving God and neighbor.

The world is indeed full of tragedy and desperation, truly in need of redemption, truly in need of a redeemer. We long for God's presence here with us in the midst of great suffering, to heal the pains of a ravaged world. As we cry out to God in our prayers of lament, inherent in that cry is the faith that God will act. Indeed, God must act. Because we are all God's people.

Until then, we wait. But in this time of waiting, we are not left without hope. We know that God will never abandon us or disown us. It with this assurance that we can cry out with hopeful expectation, "Come, Lord Jesus! Come!"