

Advent 1, Year B

November 30, 2014

Isaiah 64:1-9a O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...!”

That is the cry of the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament lesson today. It is a cry of a person who cannot find God, who feels strongly God’s *absence*—feels a sense of incompleteness within—and *yearns* for God to fill that void. This person **knows** that God *exists*, and has faith that God **can** fill the tremendous void within his soul. For in the past, God **has** torn open the heavens and come down, performing the mighty works recorded in the Torah: the deliverance through the Red Sea, the giving of the Law to Moses, the birth of a son to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Isaiah knows that God exists and is capable of deliverance; but how long must he wait for God to come *once more* into his life and the life of God’s people?

It is with this feeling of God’s *absence* in **our** broken lives, in **our** broken world, that we begin the season of Advent. God’s absence as *symbolized* by the absence of most “alleluias” in our Eucharist, by the absence of flowers on our altar, by the darkness of an Advent wreath that only slowly brightens as we await God’s coming. Absence and emptiness are important themes and teachings of Advent, and it is important during Advent for us to get in touch with our own emptiness within.

I think that many of us in our affluent society are so fearful of our own emptiness that we refuse to acknowledge it in our lives, refuse to confront it and deal with it openly and honestly. We are too quick to fill that hollowness with God-

substitutes. And so we don't recognize Isaiah's cry of desolation, or relate to the desperate *longing* he has for God. Perhaps the feeling of Isaiah could best be understood by remembering the forsakenness you felt when you were a young child separated from your mother, not knowing when she would return. You trusted in your mother's love, knew that she had the power to bring comfort and security, had the power to **fill** the emptiness; yet her absence was almost more than you could bear.

I spent Thanksgiving Day with my Dad and my brothers and their families in Chicago. The delicious meal was probably not much different from what you enjoyed: turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes & gravy, cranberries, a Jello mold, rolls & butter, green beans, *more* turkey – you know the story. By the time dessert rolled around, I wanted to say, "Stop! Enough, already! I'm full!"

But of course, I didn't. Although I was full, I had dessert anyway.

Why do we do that? Perhaps because even when our stomachs are full, there remains an emptiness within us that we hope maybe *something* – perhaps another slice of pumpkin pie? – can fill.

In our consumer society, we don't often *allow* ourselves the feeling of emptiness, for we quickly try to fill any perceived void with food, distractions, busy-ness, work, or entertainment. We don't *long* for God or *yearn* for God in our lives, because we have never allowed ourselves to be **empty** long enough to *experience* the sense of God's absence. When we get anywhere *near* experiencing emptiness, we **rush** to fill it, like air rushes to fill a vacuum. Is there silence? Turn on the radio or TV! A spare moment in the day? *Do* something useful! A *desire* for something in our life? Buy it!

When I was a child and my mother caught me eating Cheetos an hour before dinner, she would scold me and say, "You'll spoil your appetite with that junk food!" I think that our souls will never hunger for God if we are constantly feeding ourselves God-substitutes — spoiling our appetite with *spiritual* junk-food, spiritual anesthetics: constant busy-ness, work, television, gossip, surfing the internet, shopping, entertainment, what have you. "We have to *learn* to become spiritually empty," writes Richard Rohr. "If we are filled with ourselves, there is no room for another, and certainly not God."

One of the main goals of the Advent season is to *take away* some of those distractions which **keep** us from experiencing our own emptiness, keep us from experiencing a longing for God, keep us from crying out with Isaiah, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" At this time of year when every moment of our lives is full to the brim with shopping for Christmas, mailing cards, getting the kids to school programs and activities, decorating, wrapping and baking—is it any wonder that a survey a few years ago reported that a majority of Americans think something OTHER than the birth of Jesus is the most important

aspect of Christmas? A *majority* of us think that. I heard an advertisement for an upcoming television program. The ad said something like this: “Discover the *real* meaning of Christmas this Friday at 7pm, only on NBC.” Each December, millions of Americans will seek the “real” meaning of Christmas from a television program, rather than from prayer, silence, prayerful reading of Scripture or other devotional reading, taking a walk in the dark, or attending a church service. Not that any of **these**, of course, are *sure-fire* methods to get at the meaning of Christmas; but they have been around for centuries before the advent of television, and they have a better track record.

Advent calls us to open our eyes and look around at the signs of God’s absence. Where is God in the war-zones of Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, the Holy Land of Jesus’ birth? Where is God in the midst of the chronic unemployment which plagues so many families? Where is God in the racial prejudice and fear lurking under to surface of our culture, which Ferguson has exposed? Where is God for the homeless in our own community, who, for whatever reason, cannot function well enough in society to hold down any job; who sleep under the 4th Street Bridge and swell the lines at Loaves and Fishes and pack the Methodist Church Luncheons? Where is God for the elderly alone in their homes or in our local nursing homes who have no family and see no reason to live, praying only that they might die? Where is God in our **own** *spiritual* aloneness and emptiness? in our resentments and failures to reconcile and forgive?

Mother Theresa once told a British journalist, “The *spiritual* poverty of the **Western** world is **much** greater than the physical poverty of our people [in Calcutta]. You in the West have millions of people who suffer such terrible loneliness and emptiness.”

Loneliness and emptiness; and so we stuff ourselves, literally and metaphorically, and then go on to eat dessert.

I just finished reading Barbara Brown Taylor’s book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, in which she makes the same point with a *different* manifestation of our fear, pointing out how we cannot bear the dark, and so we rush to fill it with artificial light. And yet we will never know the true meaning of the abundant gift of Christmas if we do not start with Advent emptiness; we will never know the true meaning of the coming Light of the World if we do not start in Advent darkness.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Elijah experiences a time in his life when he is terribly discouraged – so much so that he prays to God that he might die. In the midst of that despair, a Word comes to him: “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Then there is a great wind, so strong that it splits mountains and breaks rocks in pieces, but the LORD is not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD is not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD is not in the fire; and

after the fire – a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah hears it, he wraps his face in his mantle and goes out and stands at the entrance of the cave. Then there comes a voice to him that says, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:11-13, NRSV)

What are we doing here?

Elijah experienced despair, and God came to him not in an earthquake, wind, or fire, but in a sound of sheer silence. In emptiness God spoke, giving Elijah renewed hope, purpose, and mission in life.

When we can *identify* with the feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and apparent hopelessness in our world, when we can see how we have become a culture where God has little place, when we can plumb the dark emptiness and need in our souls and yearn so much for God to come and restore meaning and hope and purpose in life that we cry out with Isaiah, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!....” — then — *then* we can **truly** begin to observe Advent: to welcome, appreciate, and **use** Advent.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!...”

God certainly did so at that first Christmas, and we eagerly anticipate its celebration. But may we also this Advent take time to be silent enough, still enough; to empty ourselves of the distractions; to walk for a while in the darkness; and then, and then, out of the deep yearning of our hearts, to pray with all our desire for God to tear open the heavens and come down once again to fill our lives and our world with His Presence, His Life, His love.

AMEN