

Advent 1B 2017 Sermon

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...! - Isaiah 64:1a

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. - Isaiah 64:9

I spent Thanksgiving Day with my Dad and my brothers and their families in Chicago. The traditional meal was probably not much different from what you enjoyed: turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes & gravy, cranberries, 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 it is 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 Old Testament reading, Isaiah cries out to God: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...!” It is the cry of a person who feels God’s *absence*, feels an emptiness in his life and in his world – and *yearns* for God to fill that void.

It is with this feeling of absence and emptiness in our lives and in our world that we begin the season of Advent. An absence and emptiness *symbolized* by the absence of “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 central themes of Advent, and it is important during this holy season of waiting to *allow* this emptiness to come and to be felt; for it is only when we are empty that God can fill us.

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.”¹

We suffer loneliness and emptiness; and so we stuff ourselves, literally and metaphorically. We are quick to fill any felt emptiness with busy-ness, or background music, or our cell phones, or Facebook, or television (where we can find both entertainment and a constant stream of news), or any of the thousand other “fillers” we use to try to fill the sense of loneliness or emptiness within. Is there silence? Turn on the radio or music or TV! A spare moment in the day?

Do something! A *desire* for something in our life? Buy it! Is it any wonder that we don't recognize Isaiah's cry of lament, or relate to the desperate *longing* he has for God? We don't *long* for God or *yearn* for God in our lives, because we have never allowed ourselves to be **empty** or quiet long enough to feel the inner void that only God can fill.

"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."²

I suffered from severe asthma as a child, and one day a doctor taught me a "trick" to use when I was finding it difficult to breathe. He told me, "When you can't breathe, when you are starving for air, your tendency is to want to take in more and more air. But you need to take the time to breathe *out* the **old** air, to empty your lungs, before you can fill them with fresh air." When we are starving for God, our tendency is to want to take in more and more. We need to take the time to empty our lives so that there is room for God, room for the birth of the Christ-Child within us.

And so, one of the main goals of the Advent season is to *take away* some of the distractions which **keep** us from experiencing our own emptiness, keep us from experiencing a longing for God, like Isaiah's longing, or the longing expressed in the ancient Advent hymn "O come, O come, Emmanuel!" It's admittedly difficult, especially because the rituals of buying presents, mailing cards, decorating, wrapping, baking can be GOOD things! But if we continually fill our lives with *good* things, there will be no room for the **best** – no room for God. That's why we need to allow emptiness, allow silence, allow ourselves to experience the absence of God.

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 divine Voice comes to him, telling him, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD." So Isaiah ascends the mountain. Then there is a great wind, so strong that it breaks rocks into 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. And when Elijah hears the silence, he wraps his face in his mantle and goes out and stands at the entrance of the cave – and *then* God comes to him.³

Elijah experienced despair, and God came to him, not in the terrifying power of an earthquake, the deafening noise of gale-force winds, or the all-consuming rage of fire, but rather in the sound of sheer silence. In emptiness and silence God spoke, giving Elijah renewed hope, purpose, and mission in life.

Advent calls us to emptiness and silence, where we can experience God's absence, both in ourselves, and in the world around us. Where is God in the war-

zones of Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia? Where is God in the midst of the desperate famine in Yemen? Where is God in the racial prejudice and fear always lurking just under the surface of our American culture? Where is God for the homeless in our own community, who cannot function well enough in society to hold down any job, who sleep outside because there is no room in the shelter, and who swell the lines at Loaves and Fishes and pack the Mercy Today Luncheons? Where is God for the elderly alone in their homes or in our local nursing homes who have no family and wonder why they are still alive? Where is God in the increasing polarization of our culture? Where is God in our **own spiritual** aloneness and emptiness, in our resentments and failures to reconcile and forgive?

The amazing thing is that when we allow ourselves to be empty and silent, we find that God has been there – with us, within us, and among us – all the time. It is WE who have been absent, not God! We who have been so totally filled with activities, and noise, and the constant chatter of thoughts running through our heads – so full of *ourselves* – that we have crowded God out. And we're not even conscious of the fact that we have done so.

And so the Church, in its wisdom, gives us the gift of Advent – a time for emptiness, quietness, and stillness – where we can know the presence of God, who has never been absent. “Be still, and know that I am God,” God tells us.⁴

And so, I invite you today to receive the gift of Advent. Make time and space during this holy season for quietness and stillness. Empty your mind of its chattering thoughts, agendas, and worries. Turn off the TV, the music, the cell phone, the lights – if only for a few minutes – and allow yourself to experience the silence, the darkness, the emptiness. And in that dark, empty stillness, be aware of God's presence. For, you see, Isaiah's plea has already been answered: God **has** torn open the heavens and come down!⁵ That is the truth of which we remind ourselves and which we claim for ourselves during Advent. “Advent” means “coming,” and in this holy season we experience the coming of God into our hearts and lives once more. “Let every heart prepare him room” by being emptied of all the God-substitutes with which we have filled ourselves. And then, Christ having entered, we become one with him, such that we can say, with St. Paul, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”⁶ Or, in the words of our final hymn today, (which uses an image from our Isaiah reading⁷),

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
 Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.
 Mold me and make me after Thy will,
 While I am *waiting, yielded and still*.⁸

AMEN

¹ <https://patch.com/california/lakeforest-ca/bp--the-day-mother-teresa-told-me-your-poverty-is-gree85a671097>

² “Letting Go of Ego,” Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, Wednesday, July 23, 2014

³ 1 Kings 19:11-13, NRSV

⁴ Psalm 46:10

⁵ see John 1:14

⁶ Galatians 2:20

⁷ Isaiah 64:9

⁸ Adelaide A. Pollard, 1906