Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2017

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LONGING FOR GOD Isaiah 64:1–9

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

Mark 13:24–37

My sisters and brothers, here we are again, gathered in this place on the First Sunday of Advent. Around us, out there, Christmas is already being celebrated, but we follow the beat of a different drummer. We are here, quietly gathered, watching and waiting for God to enter into our hurting world and into our own lives filled with longing.

We keep Advent as a season of the church year because it enables us not only to anticipate all over again the birth of the Christ Child, but also to get in touch with our own human experience of God’s absence and hiddenness. Let’s be honest. We do not always experience God’s presence in our lives. There are times in our lives and the life of the world as we experience it when God seems to be absent and hidden. Where are you, O God, when we need you? “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold,” wrote William Butler Yeats in his poem, “The Second Coming.” Last Friday, the sirens wailed in the first test of Hawai‘i’s nuclear bomb warning system since the height of the cold war. The homeless wander our streets looking for places to pitch their tents. A tax bill favoring the wealthy is passed in the U.S. Senate. The president twitters anti-Muslim videos from a British far right Nazi group. Where are you, O God? Why do you hide your face from us?

Now, the experience of a God who is hidden and absent is no stranger to the Bible. Today, we encountered two passages of scripture, Isaiah chapter 64 and Psalm 80, in which God’s hiddenness is openly expressed. The prophet who speaks the words in Chapter 64 does so on behalf of his people. The people of Israel have returned to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon. But the city they returned to bore little resemblance to the city they had left sixty years prior. The city of Jerusalem had been reduced to rubble and the magnificent temple built by King Solomon had been completely destroyed. For the returning exiles, life was filled with great uncertainty and suffering. They had come home, yes, but for them life was unbearable.

Where was God when God was needed so much? The prophets announced that the exile had been a punishment brought by God because the people had left the covenant and had abandoned their trust in God. On the other hand, the prophet who spoke the words we heard this morning places the blame partly on God. It was because God had hidden God’s face that the people were led to sin.

*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.*

*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.*

—Isaiah 64:5,7

The prophet senses that God is still hidden. Hence, the plea:

*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!*

*—Isaiah 64:1–2*

Composed in an earlier time and context, the psalmist

makes the same plea:

*Restore us, O God:*

*let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

The feeling here is that of despair and abandonment, hopelessness and grief. God is hidden in the heavens and needs to come down to make things right. After all, are we not the clay and God the potter? Are we not the work of God’s hands? Are we not all God’s people?

This feeling of abandonment, this notion that God is hidden is something we too feel much of the time. The difference is that we no longer expect God to come down and suddenly make things right. Only football players pray for that. For most of us, God remains hidden from view, and we have learned to live with that. Let’s be honest. We don’t expect God to appear to make things right; and even though we still pray for God to make an appearance, we basically feel that it’s up to us to do something.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was put to death by the Nazis during World War II, echoes the sentiment. Bonhoeffer declared that we have learned to live without God. We do not live our days expecting a dramatic turn of events orchestrated by God. We live our lives without the God envisioned by the prophet and the psalmist. The God they envisioned as dwelling in the heavens remains in the heavens hidden from our view.

How, then, does God come to us? Dietrich Bonhoeffer went on to say that although we have learned to live without God, this does not mean that God is not present with us. He said that *we stand before God* *continually even when we are living without God.* “Before God and with God we live without God,” wrote Bonhoeffer.[[1]](#footnote-1) It’s a paradox. We live without God and with God.

The important thing to say this morning on this First Sunday of Advent is that God no longer comes to us as a bolt of lightening from the heavens. God comes to us in the dailyness of our lives. Most especially, God comes to us when we are willing to confess our despair, our feelings of abandonment and the longing of our lives. It is then that God comes not with fanfare, but quietly, unobtrusively, in ways that are surprising when we think about them.

A week ago, I was feeling a little down and hopeless. I began to wonder how Advent would unfold with all the bad news surrounding us. Would I be able to speak a word of hope this year in my preaching? I began to become anxious and just a little fearful. And then I turned on the news program “60 minutes” and began to listen attentively. Scott Pelley was doing a piece on the continuing violence and warfare in Syria. He was reporting that President Assad and his military had for sometime been especially targeting hospitals in areas held by Syrian rebels. There have been 450 attacks on Syrian hospitals. The bombings have claimed hundreds and hundreds of lives, many of them babies and children. 800 medical staff have been killed. The devastation reminds me of this morning words from Isaiah:

*Your holy cities have become a wilderness,*

*Zion has become a wilderness,*

*Jerusalem a desolation.*

*Our holy and beautiful house,*

*where our ancestors praised you,*

*has been burned by fire,*

*and our pleasant places have become ruins.*

—Isaiah 64:10–11

And yet in the midst of this horrible scene, there are signs of hope. Syrian doctors and nurses continue to tend the wounded. Lives are being saved. Hospitals are being constructed underground. And American doctors, through the Syian American Medical Society, have volunteered to go to Syria and serve with the Syrian medical community at the risk of their lives. The Society has sent 100 of its members to Syria and has raised one hundred million dollars, which has provided 120 ambulances, the restoration of 135 medical facilities, and salary support for 2000 health staff. One of the doctors interviewed, a distinguished orthopedic surgeon from Chicago, was Dr.Samar Attar, a mild-mannered and pleasant man. When Scott Pelley asked him why he would be willing to risk his life and comfort in this act of selfless service, Dr. Attar said: “Well, the Syrian nurses and the doctors, the rescue workers that I met told me that they would rather risk their lives dying in Syria trying to save lives than grow old comfortably from a distance watching the world fall apart, and I thought 20 years from now I didn’t want to look back and say that I wasn’t part of that.”

My friends, this is how God comes to us, and because God comes to us in this way, hope is given birth in us. It is not a hope that says that every sickness will be cured, that wars will suddenly cease, that people will instantly learn to love one another. It is not to be confused with optimism. It is a hope that with God accompanying us, we will make it through the darkness, even as we do not quite know what is in store for us. We need only trust the God who is with us and for us.

God’s power, you see, is not a power that controls and prevents bad things from happening. Wrote Bonhoeffer from his prison cell, “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.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, God’s power is known in compassionate love, a love that chooses to give up all controlling power in order to be with us and for us in our own experience of suffering and despair and abandonment.

My sisters and brothers, in this Season of Advent, as the parable from the Gospel of Matthew advises, let us be alert and watchful for the daily signs of God’s presence among us. God’s presence may be recognized in a word of encouragement, a glimmer of hope given in our despair, a newfound courage to speak the truth of our lives, an act of forgiveness, a healing even in the absence of a cure, a restoration we had not expected. Thus, even in a time such as this, we will still know that God is above us, beneath us, behind us, before us, among us, with us, and for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New york: Macmillan, 1971), 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)