

Sermon – December 3, 2023

“The Hidden God”

Text: Isaiah 64: 1-9

Prayer: Spirit of Life, open our hearts and minds to receive the Advent message of hope from the prophet Isaiah. Amen.

The Christian liturgical year has turned, and the Advent season is staring us in the face. As the curtain rises on this first Sunday of Advent, we see the writer of third Isaiah on centre stage reciting a message of lament and hope for the Israelites. A lament is a prayer that cries out to God from the midst of desperate grief, pain, or any circumstance that seems out of control. It vocalizes the hurt to God with the conviction that God can and will bring relief. A lament is not just the venting of frustration, but it is a profound statement of faith in God from the midst of utter human hopelessness.

As a point of historical context, Isaiah chapter 64 was written around 6th century before common era, during the post-exilic period when the exiled Israelites were just returning to Jerusalem from so many years of captivity and exile in Babylon. The Persian king Cyrus had defeated the Babylonians (539 BCE) and established a decree that the exiles could return to their homeland. Threats, divisions, land battles and power struggles erupted between and among the returnees, those who had remained in the land, and those who had settled there from other places after Jerusalem was conquered by foreign invaders. The whole time they had been in Babylon, the exiled people had thought and dreamed about coming home. They imagined returning to their houses and their fields as they remembered it and prayed about returning to their Temple. But when they did come home, they found their city in shambles and their Temple in ruins. They were devastated beyond compare. Something went terribly wrong.

The opening words of Isaiah 64 were full of anguish. He wrote to a desperate people which seem to be at the end of its rope. Listen to his lament, his cry of distress that calls out from this morning's reading. *“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,”* he yells at God. *“Make things better, God! Come and shake the mountains! Make yourself known to the nations. Do the things you did in days of old when people really knew you were God!”*

This is a desperate voice, a voice of someone who is yearning for a change, longing for a saving act, wishing for a complete reversal of events.

These were followed by a confession that all of the people have sinned. Yet even in that confession seems to blame God: *“You were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed. It’s not our fault, God! If you were not so far off, if you were not absent when we needed you, we wouldn’t have sinned.”* The writer believes that God has hidden in anger. In their sin, the people had become like a filthy cloth and fading leaves. Their lives had become barren, painful and empty brought on by the consequences of their sinfulness. We feel the writer’s honest feelings: anger, longing, confessing, blaming lamenting.

Today, we might say that this passage portrays utter depression in the midst of the ongoing wars between Ukraine and Russia; between Hamas and Israel armed forces; and many civil wars happening in Africa and Asia. Jewish professor *Professor of International Political Theory at Durham University, Ilan Zvi Baron* writes on the ongoing Hamas-Israel conflict: *“We have, unfortunately, been here before... For too long, the rhetoric around this conflict has emphasised violence as a political solution when all violence ends up doing is killing more people and encouraging more violence. What is lacking ...is the ability to acknowledge the shared experience of human suffering - the innocent Palestinian victims of the Israeli army, and to the innocent Israeli victims of Hamas. We need to think differently, we need to speak differently. We cannot deny that the place many (on both sides) are coming from is one of pain, trauma, anger, sadness, hurt, and despair... The question that we should be asking ourselves at this juncture is why is it so hard to acknowledge pain and suffering, death and destruction, without having to score political points about who suffered more?”*

Looking at the world around us. Something is terribly wrong. Not only we are confronted with these conflicts brought about by wars but there is also the wrath of nature to contend with: wildfires, earthquakes, hurricanes and tsunamis. There is famine and disease. And then there is the suffering brought on by human behaviour. There is corruption and greed. There is fear and anxiety as our nation and the world seem to slip into economic recession. And what about our own lives? Some of us struggle every day with difficulties and challenges. We struggle with illness, with depression, with grief and loss. We struggle with job insecurity, and

the constant battle to make ends meet. We struggle with the loss of friendships and relationships. We struggle with addiction and isolation.

We too, at times, utter words of desperation: *“Where are you God? Do not hide from us. Why don’t you do something earthshaking? Why don’t you come to our rescue? O God, if only you would split the sky open and come down into the midst of this mess and heal us!”* In a marriage on the brink of divorce a prayer goes out, *“O God, what did we do wrong?”* In a seemingly hopeless situation and the increasing limitations of hospital resources, a mother prays, *“Merciful God, where are you now that my child sick needs you most?”* In the persistent financial crisis, an unemployed man prays, *“I haven’t had steady work for a year now. Give me a sign of hope.”* O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!

But through the anger and sadness, the confessing and blaming, the writer comes with a deep assurance - a glimmer of hope, of faith, of trust. *“Yet, O God, you are our Parent, our loving Father and our caring Mother; we are the clay and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.”* The writer assures the people that God is still present – God was never hiding. It’s the human heart and soul that hides not God. God is present through you and me - through the hands, the heart, the lips, the love from those who live in God’s ways. The image of God as potter and the people as clay takes us into a new level of hope. No longer are we talking about God hiding. Instead, God is invited in – to make Godself known again. This is the Advent message of hope. I like what the theologian Tim Suttle has to say about the image of the potter and the clay: *“The potter working with clay became a powerful way for the people of God to make sense of the hiddenness of God and the pain of their lives. It fed their imagination, helping them connect the dots between their present struggle and where God was trying to take them...”*

The ending of this lament is poignant: *“Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember our iniquity forever... we are all your people.”* As we enter into this journey of Advent, I wonder what might happen to our communities if we took Third Isaiah’s reminder of communal responsibility and accountability more seriously? In our culture where division and separation are all too often the norm, what might happen if we took the concept of “we are all your people?” the notion of welcome and inclusivity; the view of “I see you as my neighbour” to heart? What if we thought significantly about those on the opposite side of our own spectrum – be it theologically, politically, economically, socially and considered them as part of us?

What if their past became our past? What if their brokenness, our own? How would we pray? How would we lament? How would we hope? How would we look for the long-expected Jesus we anticipate in this season? What should be our Advent message to those who have lost hope? With the image of the potter and the clay, I strongly believe that God is calling us to reshape ourselves and our communities from death to life, from despair to hope, from hate and injustice to love.

Friends, as we gather today at the table of grace, as we share the bread and the cup of blessing, know that we are not alone. God doesn't hide. This is the message of hope as we await the birth of Jesus. Welcome to Advent. Amen.

Sources that helped me with my sermon:

BCUC Lectionary Group

Stephen Riley, "All of Us!", <http://www.aplainaccount.org/advent-1b-1st-reading>

MagdaleneMusings.blogspot.com

Tim Suttle, "Decrescendo", patheos.org.