

First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte, NC

November 30, 2014

Rev. Erika Funk

Be Careful What You Wish For
Psalm 80:1-7 & Isaiah 64:1-9

Years have past, the distance grows, the silence deepens. We hardly remember the sound of their voice.

Wars have been fought, diseases have ravaged, famines took over.
Depression, anxiety, loss, defeat, and hopelessness have entered in.
Where is God? Where is Christ? When will the silence end?

Can we be as honest as the bible? Can we allow ourselves and others to lament in the same way we give value to the laments of scripture?

Maybe this is your favorite time of year, maybe you love the greenery, the shopping, the family gatherings, the special music, the quiet light of candles. Or maybe you were joyful until the Ferguson verdict or the shooting of a boy with a BB gun, or your precious one got the terrible diagnosis or the pay cut or the layoff.

The question for us this Advent may be - Can we be as honest as Isaiah's community seeking understanding of pain? We, too, may want to yell (quietly and in secret of course) "Make things better God, come down here, do something! Like you used to."

I had a colleague once who had a sign on her door that said "Don't make me come down there! Signed, God." Sandy was the senior pastor of the church I was serving back then and that sign became more intimidating the more I read it. Do I really want God to come on down here? Do I really want God to tear open the heavens, shake the mountains and boil the seas? Can I admit that Isaiah's God scares me a little?

The book of Isaiah is broken down into three parts, the middle section begins with words of comfort and ends with celebration:

"You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace...and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." But now, in the third section, the joy is gone and nobody is clapping. The exiles who returned from Babylon are still living amidst ruins and rubble. The temple wasn't being restored to its former glory and the throne of David was a ridiculous notion. B. Lundblad

One preacher calls this the "mood swings of the prophet Isaiah." The third section of the prophet's book begins a mood swing, one of remorse and deep sorrow.

*The prophet confesses that all of them have sinned. Yet even that confession seems to blame God: "But 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 we wouldn't have sinned. We feel the whiplash of the prophet's honest feelings: anger, longing, confessing, blaming.*

I think it's inappropriate to call the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas one set of mood swings after another. Macy's says in its big red letters "Believe", Starbucks cups tell us to "be of good cheer", Coke, make someone happy, but Advent says the world is in darkness, in sin and error pining, the enemies are drawing near, the sacred places are in ruins. Sacred places like the church of Michael Brown's father which was burned to the ground after the verdict regarding his son's death was announced. The church was not in the center of the protests or the looting. It sits outside of all that, the businesses on either side left untouched. Last week Michael Brown's father was baptized in that church. Even the death of his son could not remove him from his awareness of need of God's grace and wholeness. Here we lay in sin and error pining....waiting for our souls to feel their worth.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-brown-family-pastor-tries-to-make-sense-of-fire-that-gutted-his-church/2014/11/28/15520f3e-7711-11e4-a755-e32227229e7b_story.html

Advent is a time to get real, not pretend. The radical honesty of scriptures reminds us it's okay to admit there is chaos and we are not in control. The announcement of advent is: Our world is not okay.

Isaiah's people lament that God seems to be hiding. We think God is far away. Like a child ignored by her parent we feel the disapproval...the disappointment. Because we know God was so very present in the past – it's all the more hurtful that God turns away now when things are not okay.

That sense of God hiding is God's way to **"deconstruct a distorted set of beliefs and practices,"** writes one professor theology. **"thereby opening Israel to receive again (as gift and event) their calling to be God's people. Hiding is a form of divine judgment that ultimately serves divine mercy, a 'No' that clears the ground for a more profound 'Yes'."** Feasting, Bader-Saye

God is like the parent of children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder – an error in the brain that causes the child to get angry at authority, be defiant, impulsive, obsessively resisting complying to rules, blaming others for their mistakes, and on and on. We are the child that refuses to wear a coat on a freezing day and then blames dad for not giving us a coat.

That parent must not respond to the child's defiance with a forceful "I will make you behave" but rather with a quieter response that may appear to be abandonment or an ignoring of the pleas. Letting them walk out the door in a t shirt when its 30 degrees. It looks like abandonment, like indifference. But this quiet "no" is really a more profound "yes." One that creates a stronger bond through independent thinking and an awareness of consequences. This is more true love than dominance or "forcing one to love." Ours is a God that does not always confront us in dramatic ways but allows us to walk in the cold. To

the point that we wonder if God has forgotten us! How do we reconcile the powerful, dramatic God of Exodus with the behind the curtain, absentee father of Isaiah?

“We want the mountains to quake and the nations to tremble at God’s presence.”

Or do we?

In his letters and papers from a German concentration camp in 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer dared to draw this hard to swallow conclusion “God would have us know that we must live as men [and women] who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before who we stand continually. Before God and with God we live with out God. God lets us himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. God 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.” (Letters and papers from prison)

Who, then, is this God we are waiting for? This is a God who

- cannot be controlled. God acts when God chooses to act.
- This is a God who “hides” so we will face the consequences of our sins
- This is a God who refuses to always go for the dramatic, powerful act of rescue
- this is a God whose omnipotence is in God’s vulnerability, non-coercive love. God’s power is in humility rather than domination and force.

If that seems like bad news here is the for sure good news – the claim of the people that God is the potter. The wheel continues to spin, we are not yet complete and so anything is still possible. God is close, as close as the potter’s hands upon the clay. God is molding and shaping the people over time, as a parent shapes a child over time. We are called to be open to that shaping, not in opposition but welcoming change and malleable in the hands of God. But we should be aware that if we pray for God to come down here, for God to tear open heavens where would that power land? On the US/Mexico borders? In the White House? In the Ukrainian/ Russian border? Upon the rebels or the government? If we pray for God to arrive, for God to disrupt the status quo, we should be prepared for disruption of our status quo.

Later today after the second service the chapel will be open for prayer and voices to reflect on the verdict and violence in Ferguson, MO. Two questions will be offered: “What are the things you have heard or seen that make you frustrated, angry or distrustful? And “what are the things you have heard or seen that give you hope or joy?” Sharing our fears and our hopes in community, despite the discomfort it may create, is the first step of Advent – telling truths and allowing God to enter into that.

In Advent we reflect and ponder what it means to be shaped by a patient, loving hand of God who chooses powerlessness and suffering as the mode to salvation/redemption/new life rather than violence and dominion. God has not left. God is to be found in the less

expected places –we will need to walk into the laments of others to see it, we will have to enter into powerlessness to see how great God is.

“The first gift of Advent is telling the truth.” The truth is here, it is in the places we nurture and prepare. It is found like a guest at our door once we have made up the extra room and put on the coffee. It is illuminated by the smallest of lights in the night. God may come through a grand jury verdict or God may come through a protest line. How will we know? We might not know, but we should be ready for God to come in a way that we did not expect and that disrupts our own status quo. Because if God is coming only to confirm that all is well – what’s the point?

During World War II, a young woman named Etty Hillesum kept a journal of her days under German occupation in her native Holland. As she watched the slow destruction of the Jewish ghetto in Amsterdam, she wrote: "The jasmine behind my house has been completely ruined by the rains and storms of the last few days...But somewhere inside me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed...And it spreads its scent round the House in which You dwell, oh God. You can see, I look after You. I bring you not only my tears and my forebodings on this stormy, grey Sunday morning, I even bring you scented jasmine.. I shall try to make you at home always."

She brings her tears and her forebodings, the greyness of the day and the scent of jasmine. She speaks directly to God saying, "I shall try to make You at home always." No matter what time it is in our lives, her words can be a quiet prayer whispered in the days between Thanksgiving and Christmas. B. Lundblad