

SERMON

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT – YEAR B

“INTERVENTION TENSION”

ISAIAH 64:1-9 / DECEMBER 3, 2017

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Some of you use the bus service to get around. You know what it's like to have to wait for a bus – boring at best and painful at worst when, on a cold, blustery winter's day the bus stop you're at doesn't have adequate shelter. When I lived in Oakville, Manitoba, for a time I commuted to Winnipeg to work. I would catch the Greyhound bus at the edge of the Trans-Canada Highway early in the morning. On a summer's day it could be quite pleasant out in the midst of the gorgeous prairie countryside. But in winter – waiting for that bus, which was frequently late, could be brutal.

But as hard as it is to wait for a bus, it's laughably trivial compared to what some people wait for. The most profound and perplexing puzzle for the Jews in biblical times was why God gave the nation over to their enemies, first Assyria, then Babylon.

Waiting for God's intervention was a long and harsh wait. The psalm for today is also about the challenge of waiting. The psalmist begs God to come and save the people and complains that God had fed them with the bread of weeping and given them tears in plenty to drink. And Isaiah wistfully recalls the long-gone days when God did awesome deeds

delivering them from bondage in Egypt. But in his own day, Isaiah could only lament, "...we all fade like a leaf...God, you have hidden your face from us..."

Isaiah is waiting, not for a bus on a cold wintery day of course, but waiting for the sound of freedom from above. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...." The waiting prophet cries, his ears straining to hear the signal of God's intervention.

I imagine we wouldn't need to strain our ears to hear the sounds of the heavens tearing apart --- what a noise that would make!! But the prophet has lived a long time under silent skies. The sound of God ripping God's way into our world had not been heard. It wasn't that Isaiah had far to look to witness a torn universe, but what he saw and heard didn't seem like God on the way. Instead what he saw and heard would offend a god of justice: right was on the scaffold and wrong was on the throne.

The sound of the mountains shaking and the earth quaking did not announce God's arrival, only more death and destruction. And in between the notes of human misery was the silence of God. Where is the God of the exodus, Isaiah wonders – the God who led the Israelites out of Egypt with mighty signs and wonders, who opened a way across the red sea, who led the people through the wilderness by a pillar of fire by night and cloud by day? The hidden God of Isaiah is the God who does not act powerfully and dramatically to rescue the Israelites from their distress. The frustration expressed in Isaiah reflects the prophet's struggle to reconcile the ancient

stories of God's powerful presence with the present experience of God's absence.

Who has not at one time or another wondered the same thing? If in biblical times God intervened in history with 'awesome deeds' why does God not do so today? We read stories about God's spectacular interventions, yet we look in vain for such visible signs of God's involvement in the world today. We want the mountains to quake and the nations to tremble at God's presence. We want the heavens torn apart and God to come with power to do spectacular things like dismantle nuclear weapons; to clean our air and water; to rid the world of disease; to calm the destructive forces of nature – and on and on.

And in our personal lives, too, we experience divine silence. Aging parents battle deteriorating health, while their adult children with their own families and their own problems feel helpless to offer assistance. A struggling teenager gulps a bottle of pills. Divorcing parents fight bitterly over custody of the kids. An emergency vehicle siren wails in the night for someone ill or injured. Those out of work wait endlessly it seems to find meaningful employment.

Sometimes it's hard to discern even the faintest signal that God is not entirely absent and silent. Isaiah and the psalmist and even the writer of the gospel reading for today yearn for a powerful, visible, divine intervention. "Hear us....shine forth, stir up your might, come and save us," implores the psalm writer. And Isaiah cries out, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence!"

He cajoles God to “come down” like fire to brushwood that causes water to boil, to perform “awesome deeds that we did not expect.”

The disconnect between what we sometimes experience and what we pray for that results from God’s apparent silence is a source of understandable anxiety and frustration. Praying to God for mighty acts of deliverance is an entirely human and genuinely Christian response to the pain and suffering of the world, of our neighbours, and of our own lives. I intend never to stop praying for God’s miraculous intervention; such prayers remain a staple of my daily prayer life. But this season of advent that we now enter adds an important qualification. God is not a cosmic concierge. Human experience gives the lie to the delusion, so deeply embedded in the North American psyche, that every problem has a solution and that every question has an answer. Sometimes all we can do is wait.

After twenty years as a professor at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard, the Catholic priest Henri Nouwen moved to a home for the severely disabled called Daybreak in Toronto. He recalls the temptation of Jesus to turn stones into bread. He suggests, this is the temptation to be ‘relevant’, that is, to do something concrete about the world’s suffering.

Nouwen said, “Oh, how I have wished I could do that! Walking through the towns on the outskirts of Lima, Peru, where children were dying from malnutrition and contaminated water, I would not have been able to reject the magical gift of making the dusty stone-covered streets into places where people could pick up any of the thousands of rocks and discover that they were croissants, coffee cakes, or fresh-baked buns, and where they

could fill their cupped hands with stale water from the cisterns and joyfully realize that what they were drinking was delicious milk.”

In his sense of frustration, Nouwen reminds me of the prophet Isaiah, “Oh, God tear open the heavens and come down! Prove yourself! Do something!”

As the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer languished in a German concentration camp in 1944, he thought deeply about this seeming divine absence or hiddenness of God. He wrote these words, “God would have us know that we must live as persons who manage our lives without God. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us. The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets God’s self 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 God is with us and helps us.”

For Bonhoeffer, this realization did not amount to a denial of faith, but to a retrieval of faith in the God of the cross, whose power is suffering, whose omnipotence is vulnerability. What Bonhoeffer discovered was that the hiddenness of God is not a cloak of humility covering an awesome, powerful glory – a kind of Clark Kent/Superman act – but rather is a reflection of the divine character, a divine determination to relate to the world through the vulnerable path of noncoercive love and suffering rather than through domination and force.

Christian writer and activist Shane Claiborn writes, “Everything in our society teaches us to move away from suffering, to move out of neighbourhoods where there is high crime, to move away from people who don’t look like us. But the gospel calls us to something altogether different. We are to laugh at fear, to lean into suffering, to open ourselves to the stranger. Advent is the season when we remember how Jesus put on flesh and moved into the neighbourhood. God getting born in a barn reminds us that God shows up in the most forsaken corners of the earth.” And of our lives.

God’s refusal to replicate the red sea-type deliverance does not mean that God has abandoned Israel or the church or us. Our hope does not rely on God’s acting today in the same ways God acted in the ancient stories, but it does rely on God being the same God yesterday, today, and tomorrow – a God who hears our cries, a God who does not abandon us, a God who will finally redeem all that is lost in a new heaven and new earth. The tradition of biblical lament, does not invoke the past as nostalgia, nor does it dismiss the present in despair; rather, it draws on the collective memories of God’s people as a source of hope for the future.

So in the waiting time, Isaiah remembers, recalls, retells the stories of God’s saving acts in the past. From those recollections he derives comfort and inspiration and hope for the future. The images that Isaiah presents of God as parent and potter are helpful. Such images suggest closeness and personal connection. Yet neither image suggests a God who “would tear open the heavens.”

Instead they evoke a God whose mode of action looks more like that of an artist or a parent than that of a superhero. God forms and shapes the people as a parent, over time, shapes them, as a potter lovingly molds clay. Isaiah calls on Israel to be malleable in the hands of God and he reminds God to fulfill the task of forming Israel into a people of blessing.

Coming in hiddenness; arriving in weakness and vulnerability, coming not in brute power, but in the greater power of tender love – that is the story of Christmas, which we imaginatively wait for in this advent season. For in truth God did tear open the heavens, but few paid attention, at least at first. There was no fire, no earthquake, no awesome spectacle --- just the cry of a tiny baby lying in a manger in a small town in a conquered, beleaguered nation.

We cannot know how it happened; we cannot understand the mystery. It is not a matter of rational thought or reasoned argument, but, rather, it is a fact of faith, that God did indeed tear the heavens apart, bringing together the divine and the human in this one we call Christ, who came to us first as the baby born in Bethlehem. And in that action of God, we come to know that God's interventions do not reverberate like a pounding sledge hammer, but come to us whisper-like – a tender, gentle intervention.

Most often God works in us like a loving parent, comforting us, strengthening us, empowering us, or like a skillful potter shaping us, molding us to be those who likewise comfort, strengthen, empower, shape and mold the world around us for good, for justice, for peace. The kingdom is not one of violent uprising, not a battleground but rather, a ground in

which, as Jesus once described, mustard seeds are planted – tiny and imperceptible at first but over time growing into a large and life-giving plant. In his classic hymn “O little town of Bethlehem”, Phillip Brooks describes the discipline of waiting for the invisible kingdom: “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of God’s heaven. No ear may hear Christ’s coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still, the dear Christ enters in.” May it be so for all of us in this holy season and always. Amen.

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