

“THE GIFT OF A PRAYERFUL ADVENT”

Isaiah 64:1-9

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As this Advent season was approaching, I kept thinking about Advent 1996. That was the year my dad died, right before the beginning of Advent. It was a different and difficult Advent, certainly not what we had been expecting. We were all sad. It was hard to concentrate, to work, to preach. I found I didn't have the energy for the usual Christmas preparations, except a little bit at a time. I worried about my mom, who was crying a lot, and my kids, who missed their Pappap. I wondered which traditions we needed to keep the same as always, and what we should change up. I didn't quite know how we'd get through Christmas. This year, I'm remembering what that Advent felt like.

But I remember also that I was surprised at how much comfort I found in the season. Our family traditions and rituals like the Advent wreath helped me feel grounded. The loving kindness of a wonderful congregation surrounded us. Doing things for others reminded me that life went on. The music lifted my spirits. Advent's emphasis on recognizing our human neediness resonated with me. The story of Jesus coming to be God's presence among us spoke to me in a new way. Most of all, the realization that, yes, indeed, faith *is* sustaining, even in a hard time, became part of Advent's meaning for me.

I really understood then that there are gifts of God's grace for us even in the hardest times. I'm not saying that this makes bad things good, that God sends those painful experiences on purpose to teach us lessons, or that we should seek them out. Just that there is always grace; there are always gifts.

I hardly need to say that this Advent is not the Advent season we are used to, not the Advent season we hoped for, not what we planned. Indeed, even now, we aren't entirely sure *what* to plan on. We don't know how bad the pandemic will be in the next few weeks; we don't know when or if we can be with loved ones, or if our tentative, pared-down plans will have to be changed yet again. It does seem clear that some cherished traditions won't be the same as in other Decembers and others just won't happen this year. Undoubtedly our preparations for the season will be different, too. Many things seem harder than usual. And our immediate, personal fears, disappointments, and sense of being unmoored are just the close-to-home manifestations of bigger realities we all share in: the sorrow and suffering of the pandemic, the tensions of our culture, and the awareness of so much that isn't right in our world.

This is us in Advent 2020. Wondering what we are to do with this most unusual Advent, and maybe, hopefully, trying to discover what its gifts may be.

We know that Advent is supposed to be a season of prayer. And I think we often *want* to have a prayerful Advent, and start out determined to do so... but there are so many distractions that

it can be hard. I wonder if perhaps this “different” year might invite us (or nudge us, or shove us) into a more intentionally prayerful Advent.

Some of us may have more time on our hands – more solitude, more quiet. Fewer distractions, fewer places to go, fewer demands on our time. Maybe even, for some, a sense of emptiness.

Can this allow us to make space for listening, waiting, sitting in God’s presence? For opening our hearts to God in a way that a quick, perfunctory prayer doesn’t? For a new awareness of how much we need God’s love?

On the other hand, some of us *don’t* have more time and space in our lives. Maybe we are stressed because it has become so much harder to do what we have to do. Maybe we are juggling too many worries, too many responsibilities, too much pain, too much news and information.

Can those pressures be what push us into prayer, out of necessity, or longing, in this season?

Whatever gets us there, I hope that this Advent may be a time to really embrace the gift of prayer.

It seems incontrovertible to me that part of our prayer, especially now, has to be lament. That’s where Isaiah 64 comes in. “O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” it begins. This prayer is a lament, or more specifically, what scholars of the Hebrew Bible term a “communal lament.” In other words, it is the voice of “we” not “me.” It’s an expression of the people’s shared experience of suffering and loss. Probably it comes from early in the Babylonian captivity, not long after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylon’s armies and the destruction of the temple – a national disaster, a crisis of faith, and an existential threat all rolled into one. “O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” It’s a raw, unfiltered, anguished plea for God to intervene and give them their life back. This is the prayer of people who have come to a point in their journey where there can no longer be any pretending that the situation isn’t desperate.

“O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” We’d recognize the emotion in the words, even without knowing the specifics of the circumstances.

The prayer hints at what the people of Israel want to beg of God (and do, not only here but more explicitly in other prayers): “Fix things. Take away our enemies’ power to hurt us. Relieve our suffering and restore what we’ve lost. Show us that you haven’t abandoned us.”

We get all that.

A big part of this prayer involves *remembering*.

First of all, the people praying this prayer remember ways God has been faithful to them in the past – the amazing things God did for them, the blessing of God’s presence in their midst, the might and majesty of God revealed to them, the hard times only their God could have seen

them through. I wonder if we devote enough attention to remembering those sorts of things? Is Advent, this Advent, the time to do that? Would that perhaps help us to find perspective and hope in this time, and the trust to know that God will walk with us in this, too?

But that's not all the prayer of Isaiah 64 remembers. The people go on to remember that they themselves sometimes *forgot* about this God who had done so much for them. That they transgressed the boundaries God established for them to live well together in community. That they flirted with other gods from time to time. That even their good deeds were corrupted by sin and hypocrisy. We can't help but see that they have interpreted their suffering as God's punishment for their collective sins.

It was entirely typical of the ancient worldview to see any calamity as caused by God and a sign of God's displeasure. We don't generally share that view of the world; yet we know that human actions have consequences, not only on an individual level but on a societal and even worldwide level. Prayer is the proper context for contemplating that truth – with respect to personal relationships or to the many forms of suffering that fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable. Lament has a place here, as does the repentance it hopefully leads us to. Advent, after all, is supposed to be a season of repentance. Repentance is part of a prayerful Advent. It's repentance that allows us to welcome Christ again, in new ways, into our world and our lives.

The prayer of Isaiah 64 begins with an eloquent cry to God for help – heartfelt and hurting. But what I think is *most* interesting about this prayer is where it ends up:

We are your people, God.
We are the clay.
You are the potter.

They started out with the determined hope in the notion that “prayer changes things,” as so many inspirational plaques proclaim. But they ended up instead with the much more sound theological truth that *prayer changes US*.

I wonder if that could be one of the gifts of a so-different Advent... a prayerful Advent?

Then I wonder... if this is a gift we want.
Do we really want God to shape us? Are we able to trust God for that?

It's not the “fix” we might like to see, any more than this is the Advent we want.
But maybe this is the Advent we need,
and maybe that is exactly the kind of divine intervention we need this Advent.

“O, that you would come down” is, we Christians believe, a prayer that is answered by Jesus. It's a prayer for Advent, when we wait with longing to celebrate Jesus' coming anew to our world and our lives. It's a prayer for THIS Advent, this different and difficult Advent, as we seek to discern and embrace the gifts of grace God holds out for us.
Amen.