

Title: Yearning for Hope

Series: Advent 2022 – Yearning for God

Scriptures: Psalm 80:1-7 and Isaiah 64:1-9

Date Used: November 27, 2022 – First Sunday of Advent

Focus: A song arises out of our inner being, a song of anguish, a yearning for hope. We long for God to come into our hopelessness and give us some tangible hope. This comes in the incarnation, God in our midst. We celebrate this tangible hope in community – family, friends, small groups, and the church.

The setting for this song of lament in the Book of the prophet Isaiah, is the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah. The Babylonian army has just torn down the walls of the city of Jerusalem, the Temple that rested on Mt. Zion has been destroyed and many of the people are about to be led away into exile to a foreign land, the land of their enemies.

A short time after this national disaster occurs, the people of Judah begin to reflect. They remember the days of old when God literally came to their rescue and saved their ancestors from slavery in Egypt; when God came to them and gave these hopeless people a reason to have hope.

Now, they look at the walls of their ancient city that have been torn down, their temple that has been reduced to a pile of rubble and they wonder, “God, where are you now? What happened to the God who used to lead us?” They begin to ponder, “What happened to the God who gave our spirits rest? Where do we find hope now? O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! O that you would come and display your power and your might! O God, come and dwell among us and give us something we can hope in?” You can hear what their hearts yearn for.

I spent the first ten years of my life living in my grandfather’s house. My parents moved into his home to help him out after my grandmother died of cancer and to literally help him save his farm. He was behind on his property taxes and had no way to pay them.

Many of my early childhood memories of my grandfather are of times we sat on his front porch swing waiting for the school bus to arrive. As we sat there waiting on the bus, my grandfather would recall stories from his life. His son Garry, who was killed in the Second World War, was the topic of many of these stories, and occasionally he would speak of his wife, my grandmother, Polly.

When I was in grade school, my grandfather began to lose his eyesight. His doctor said hardening of the arteries was to blame. There was nothing they could do about it. With limited vision, this man who loved to read westerns, to sort through the coins in his coin collection, to golf, to bowl, to drive himself places, was increasingly limited in what he was able to do.

When he began to slip into alcoholism, it came as a shock to all of us. Though several attempts were made to get him to stop drinking, he continued to sink deeper and deeper into the depths of this terrible disease.

Over the years I have often wondered “What happened to him?” As an adult I have come to believe that his grief simply caught up with him. There was a song of great sorrow that continued to play in his heart – a song of grief over the death of his son at such a young age and of his wife at the age of 60, a grief that was hopeless for him.

I really believe that through the use of alcohol he was attempting to drown out the sad tune he could find no way to compose words to. I think if he had ever found the right words, they would have been something like, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

There are times in our lives when we find ourselves with a song of lament on our hearts, a song of unimaginable sorrow. Sometimes we can compose words to that melody, as the people of Judah did, words that express the depths of our feelings of loss. But at other times, it is just a sad song that plays, a melody without words, that expresses our desire for something tangible to hope in. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

It is a song that reflects the need of our spirits to find some relevant form of hope to break into our lives, to give us something to hope in, something that we can touch and that can touch us. It is not some distant, futuristic hope that in the depths of our hearts we long for. We want something meaningful to occur in the here and now. Our desire is for God to be incarnational, for God to come to us in a form that we can relate to, and we know can relate to us. The sorrowful song on our hearts is for God to come in such a way that we know we have been visited by God. The people of Judah cried out, “Come shake the mountains, appear to us in such a way that we know you have been here.”

All too often, when we know people who are in the depths of despair, we utter phrases like, “Things will get better someday.... It’s all part of God’s plan.... You’ll see your loved one again someday when we all get to heaven“. While these phrases may reflect what we believe to be true, I don’t think they represent what we are looking for. We are looking for hope to break into our anguish and our pain in the here and now. We want God to come in a tangible, meaningful, relevant, and hope-filled way.

When I was doing a unit of Clinical Education at Children’s Hospital in Columbus in 1989, one of the areas of the hospital I was assigned to was the Neurological Unit. Most of the children on the unit were there because they were having problems with their shunts, or they had a brain tumor.

For some reason this one patient, Carrie, sticks out in my memory. She was only ten or eleven years old when she was admitted to the hospital because a brain tumor had been discovered near the base of her brain. That is not a good location for a brain tumor. The base of the brain controls our heart, our respiration; basic functions that keep us alive are located in this part of the brain.

I met Carrie and her family early on during her stay at Children’s Hospital. Throughout the time she was there, I continued to visit with she and her family.

On the afternoon she was having surgery to remove her tumor, I had prayer with Carrie and her family. The family’s priest had also made the one-hour trip to have prayer with the family as well. As you can imagine there were several family members present – the parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. They were experiencing a mixture of feelings, both hope and great concern.

After Carrie went into surgery, I occasionally went to the surgical waiting room to check in on the family. Late that afternoon I was paged to come to the surgical waiting area. When I entered the room, I could tell by the expression on the family member’s faces that something had happened.

They reported that the surgeon had come in and had told them that while he was able to remove most of the tumor, some of it was located in the brain stem, and he would not be able to remove that. They would try to destroy what remained of the tumor with radiation, but there was no guarantee that it would work. The surgeon informed them that the tumor could continue to grow in Carrie’s brain stem and could eventually kill her.

I remember that we sat together, and we prayed. The family members sat and anxiously waiting for Carrie to come out of recovery so they could see her.

An hour or so later the surgeon came back into the room. He reported that Carrie's blood pressure was dropping. Evidently, one of the blood vessels he had cauterized was leaking. He was going to have to open her up again. There was this feeling of anguish within the room. The priest that was of call for the hospital was contacted. He was asked to come in and administer last rights.

After performing this sacrament, the priest entered the surgical waiting room, talked with the family members for a few moments and then invited them to pray the rosary with him. Several of them joined him in a small consultation room that was adjacent to the surgical waiting room, and they began to pray together. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." "O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

As I listened to them pray, there was in this time of prayer an experience of incarnation – of God coming in a personal form, of God bringing hope in a relevant way. In that act of praying together, God became real to them.

In the midst of their exile in Babylon, the people of Judah continued to mourn all that they had lost. They continued to sing their songs of lament. But they started to sing these songs expressing their sorrow, together. In exile, they began to copy down the ancient stories of their faith. They began to study these writings together. They gathered together in community. And there were those prophets within their faith community, who called them to a collective hope, a time that was coming, in the not-so-distant future, when God would restore them.

There is an incredible power present in community. Whether it is a grief support group, an AA community, a family gathering, a small group gathering in a local church, or the collective gathering of God's people in worship, there is a relevant, hope embodied power present in community. I believe it is the presence of God. It is God coming to us in a way that is very personal. It is God coming to us in a form we can relate to and understand.

It is the realization that through the gift of the Holy Spirit, present in community, we become the incarnate presence of God to one another.

In Christ, God has revealed that God has come to live among us. In Christ, we believe God fulfilled the words of the lament the people of Judah sang. In Christ, "God tore open the heavens and came down." In the incarnation of Christ, God came to dwell among us.

And even though Jesus is no longer physically present, I believe Jesus meant it when he said, "Where two or more are gathered I will be present also." When we are gathered together, God takes on human form. God visits us in community.

In those relationships, in shared pain and suffering, we can experience collective grief. Together we can cry out, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

And when we gather together in community, I believe that collectively we can also experience hope. In our sharing and in praying together, we find the living presence of God. We experience "God with us." It is a hope that is relevant. It is a hope that is personal.

God takes on human form in community. When we do life together, the heavens are torn open, and God comes down.