

WAITING AND WATCHING

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.⁵You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.⁷There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

(Isaiah 64:1-9, NRSV)

Have you ever noticed how the less than idyllic moments in the Christmas story are never represented on Christmas cards? You never see a depiction of Joseph freaking out when he's first informed that Mary is pregnant. You never see pictures of shepherds cowering in fear when the angel Gabriel appears to tell them the good news. You never see a card with the innkeeper denying Mary and Joseph a room, and you never catch even a whiff of Herod, who was out to destroy any boy who remotely resembled the newborn babe. It seems that distrust, fear, apathy, and hatred are all part of the most beloved story in the Bible. If the authors of Luke and Matthew didn't feel the need to gloss over it, why do we?

The Christmas story is a beautiful story. One we love hearing again and again. To me, part of its beauty lies in its inclusion of all the human emotions we deal with on a regular basis. Part of its beauty rests in its reminder that even among distrust, fear, apathy, and evil, God breaks through.

The Bible is filled with stories about people who had the same kinds of thoughts and feelings that we have today. Even the heroes of our faith harbored doubts and demanded answers. Take the famous Genesis story of Joseph. Sold into slavery by his own brothers, Joseph had no idea he would one day wield power in Egypt. Remember the children of Israel suffering generation after generation as Egyptian slaves, with no idea that God would free them through a man named Moses. And when David was a young man fleeing King Saul's wrath, he held no notion that he would one day serve as Israel's greatest king. Whether in slavery or running for their lives, it seems that the heroes of the Bible often had no more clue about God's plans than do we.

Such was the case in today's scripture lesson from Isaiah. The people in today's lesson had been exiles living in Babylon for some 50 years. However, in 538 BC Cyrus the Persian entered Babylon bringing with him tolerant religious views. He encouraged the conquered peoples to return to their homelands and rebuild their temples. Today's passage was written between Cyrus' edict and the rebuilding of the Jewish temple. While the Israelites had returned to their homeland, they were anything but jubilant. Their grief combined with fear that in the blink of an eye it could happen all over again.

The writer of Isaiah too must have wondered as he wrote the following prayer: "Please, Lord, look down from your holy and glorious home in the heavens and see what's going on. Have you lost interest? Where is your power? Show that you care about us and have mercy...For a little while, your temple belonged to us; and now our enemies have torn it apart" (63:15 & 18, CEV).

It's clear from this passage that the Israelites are fed up. They want to see the living God with their own eyes. The writer continues his passionate prayer, "Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down—to make your name known to your foes; the nations would tremble at your presence, at the unexpected miracles you would do" (Isaiah 64:1a, 3-4 JB).

God seems absent. My guess is we can all relate. Have you ever prayed and felt like you were just talking to yourself? Have you looked at our world and wondered where is God? Have you ever felt like saying to God, why don't you throw open the gates of heaven, come down here and do something?

I agree with William Willamon, Dean of the chapel at Duke University, who suspects that, "We all have moments when we, like Isaiah, wish that God would rip open the curtain of heaven and come among us in irrefutable...undeniable vividness so that any fool would say, 'Yep, that's God.' Yet such moments are rare, even rare in the Bible, as today's word from Isaiah indicates" (from the sermon, "Where Is God?").

Who among us wouldn't wish God's presence to be easily discernable, perfectly visible, plain as day? Willamon reflects, "Sometimes there is the blinding flash of light, the unmistakable voice from above, but in my experience God speaks most often through whispers, not shouts. God is found in the shadows, rather than blinding light. And sometimes the whispers are very low whispers, and sometimes the shadows are very dark" (Ibid.).

Willamon questions the idea of a God who in biblical times communicated with people in an unmistakably loud and clear voice, but no longer does so. Listen to Isaiah's cries for God's presence. Hear King David lament the loss of God's joy. And hear as Jesus himself cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yet it must be acknowledged that one could not lament the loss of God's presence if one had never known the presence of God in the first place.

At some point in our lives most of us have felt close to God. Be it on a retreat, enjoying the splendor of nature, tucking a child in bed, or in a meaningful worship service, at one time or another most of us have felt certain of God's presence in our lives. But if the truth were told, these days are the exceptions. We don't live on spiritual mountaintops, daily convinced of God's nearness and blessings. In fact, at spiritual low points we may doubt God's existence at all. We swing between the poles of spiritual optimism and pessimism. That doesn't make us bad Christians. It only makes us human. It doesn't demean our faith. It simply means that life includes pain.

I find it comforting that a good many people in the Bible were as unclear about God's presence as we are. Perhaps God didn't communicate with them differently; perhaps the people just took more time to discern the presence of God's Spirit. And perhaps too we should remember that the biblical stories were written after the fact. It's like reading a novel for a second time. Knowing the plot, the characters, and most importantly how the story ends, we read the book from a much different perspective. Facts, which may have seemed insignificant in the first reading, become immensely important. Clues that seemed hidden now glare with meaning. So it is with the Bible. When the heroes of old were going through difficult times I doubt their attitudes were much different than ours. But when they looked back and put pen to paper, a much bolder story emerged.

Fred Craddock, a former preaching professor at Emory University suggests that, "The presence of God is so easily missed [today] because what may have originally happened in rather muted tones, is later reported in Technicolor in the Bible" (Ibid.). For instance, when the Apostle Paul tells about his conversion in his letter to the Galatians he writes in quiet, monochrome tones. Yet some 20 to 30 years later when Luke records Paul's conversion in the Book of Acts he includes a heavenly vision, blinding light, and a voice from on high. Likewise, in the account of Jesus' Baptism in the Gospel of John, Jesus hears the voice of God saying, "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." At the same time, John tells us that others standing by the muddy Jordan heard only thunder (John 1:29-34, 12:28-30). At times only the ears and eyes of faith perceive the voice of God. Where one hears only thunder, another hears the voice of God. And sometimes God's voice is so hushed we have to lean in close to get the message. For those with ears to hear, God sometimes speaks in whispers to the heart. Only later, what may have been a whisper now seems like a shout as hindsight confirms a wise decision or divine serendipity.

So what happened to the lamenting people in Isaiah's time? No burning bush, no blinding light. They waited and they worked, barely getting by, but nearly 25 years later, the temple was completed. The Bible tells us that when the foundation was laid, the elderly wept and the young shouted for joy. In Isaiah 66 the prophet hears the voice of God saying, "If you love Jerusalem, celebrate and shout! If you were in sorrow because of the city, you can now be glad. She will nurse and comfort you, just like your own mother, until you are satisfied. You will fully enjoy her wonderful glory" (66:10-11).

Weeping turned into joy and dirges into dancing. The temple was restored and with it the faith of God's people. Had God ripped open the heavens? No, not yet. But in the face of Bethlehem's newborn baby we believe God finally did pay us a visit in the flesh. Throughout this Advent season, we need not wonder where is God, for we look toward the day to which Advent points—Christmas Day—when we celebrate the very ripping open of the heavens, the birth of Immanuel, God with us. As we prepare and celebrate, we wait and watch. Wait and watch for the birth of Christ. Wait and watch for God among us. God among a nervous newly married couple and a harried innkeeper. God among ordinary shepherds going about their jobs, royal wise men searching on camels for a king, and heavenly angels announcing his arrival. God among all of them, tucked away in a manger. God among all of us, residing in our hearts. May every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing. AMEN.

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Advent II

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, Ruler of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas: we who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day; we who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us; we who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom; we whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence; we are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!"

We remember this day all who need your help. For the hungry on Long Island and the millions starving in Africa we pray. We pray that local, national, and international leaders, as well as concerned citizens, might willingly get involved to make a difference.

Thank you, O God, for this Advent season, may our hearts be readied to meet you in friend and stranger alike. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Portions of this prayer were adapted from a prayer by Henri Nouwen found at www.cin.org/liter/advnouw.html