

WRESTLING WITH GOD'S APPARENT ABSENCE

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Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19; Mark 13-24-27

It probably isn't too difficult for many of us to think of a time in our life when we were devastated by something that happened, or when we had to endure great hardship, grief, or physical, mental or emotional pain. The event or experience might be far in the past or as recent as this year, this month! It might have been just one isolated event or experience, or a long accumulation of things, one crisis piled on top of another. Knowing some of your stories and personal journeys, I am aware that what you might be remembering right now would cover a huge variety of experiences.....and no two would be alike. If we would name some of them the list might include:

- loss of job
- chronic disease
- infertility
- facing addictions
- miscarriage
- disappointments with children
- bankruptcy
- dealing with abuse
- sudden death of spouse, parent, child
- fears/phobias
- diagnosis of a physical or mental illness
- loss of homes/property
- loss of mind/body due to accident/stroke
- divorce

The list could go on.....

When we faced the most difficult, challenging, painful time of our life, we probably cried out in similar ways as the prophet, Isaiah, "Where are you, Lord?" or "Why, Lord? Why now? Why us? Why my son?" or "Why don't you come down and do something?!" One of the mysteries of life and our relationship with our Creator is that at the time when we most need to experience the closeness, the comfort, the compassion and tenderness of God, we very often feel a sense of isolation, abandonment, aloneness. The sense of God's presence may not always be felt. God

may seem distant, HIDDEN from us. It may be difficult to pray. Sometimes our very spirit feels shriveled up.

If we have not ever been in a situation where we have felt that way personally, there are times when we have some strong emotions and feelings about what is happening in our nation and the world around us, and might have cried out to God, "Come down, and break into this scene, into this mess that we and/or others have made and do something, stir things up, shake up the nations and our leaders!"

This Isaiah text for the first Sunday in Advent is not a passage that makes us 'feel good'. It is not one of comfort. It does not lead us into the season of Advent in a gentle, sweet, comfortable way, as we move toward Christmas and the birth of the Christ Child. In fact it is a communal lament! The language and emotions are raw. The images are real and understandable. They rise from the center, deep within, a visceral cry that erupts from the gut of the prophet, Isaiah.

Isaiah finds himself in the role as mediator between God and God's people. The community is on the brink of losing its center, its spiritual identity. The relationship between God and God's people is fragile, broken. Isaiah stands between them, wanting to honor God and wanting the well being of his people.

They have returned from exile, they are back in the Promised Land, but it isn't very rosy. They are suffering economic hardship and humiliation and abuse, sometimes from foreign powers, sometimes at the hand of their own leaders. Out of a situation of great need, this lament rises. It actually begins in chapter 63. Isaiah is trying to recall for them and remind them of all the gracious deeds God had done for them in the past. It was a time when God's presence was with them in the midst of their suffering. But they turned from God, they rebelled. They grieved God's spirit. God turned away. Now they felt God's absence and wondered, "Where is God?" "Where is he who brought them through the sea?" "Where is he who led them through the depths?"

Isaiah cries out to God on behalf of his people, "Look down from heaven and see....where are your zeal and your might?" "Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us. "For a long time now,

you've paid no attention to us....It's like you never knew us!" (Is. 63:12, 19)

They were wrestling with the apparent absence of God! Their life was turned upside down. They were tired, exhausted. The resources of the faithful few were depleted. Out of anguish, Isaiah pleads for God to "look down", but even that is not enough. In this desperate time, when chaos seems to engulf their world, Isaiah reaches the breaking point, "God, rip open the heavens and come down." It is time to act! The images are graphic, even violent! Mountains quake, nations shake in their boots, fire burns, water boils! Isaiah is appealing to God to reaffirm God's sovereignty! Make your name known. Restore us, O God.

How is a broken relationship restored? The people had rebelled, turned from God. God had turned away from them, abandoned his people. How can divine grace and forgiveness and healing reenter into the lives of a rebellious and broken people? How does it come into our lives? How does restoration take place, when God feels so distant and even hidden from us.

On Thanksgiving Day, John and I drove to Charlottesville to spend the day with our son, daughter-in-law and two granddaughters. While the turkey was in the oven and we were waiting for it to be done, we were playing with our granddaughters. I was holding 4 month old Kate and John was sitting in a nice, comfy chair in the living room, playing with 22 month old Samantha. He had a blanket that he would pull over his head and body, covering himself up and then he sat there quietly, without moving. Sam knew that grandpa was under the blanket, but she couldn't see him. She would stand by me, waiting with anticipation, her big blue eyes wide open, her blond curls dancing around her head as she stood on tiptoes. When John would slowly pull the blanket down, slowly revealing his face to her, Sam would just squeal with delight and cry out, "Paw-paw". Yes, she knew he was there, but one time was not enough. She wanted him to do this again and again. And each time they played this little game, there was such joy and delight expressed in the face and eyes of both Sam and Paw-paw, as the 'unveiling', the revealing took place. Maybe that is much like the joy and delight that we experience with God, when we feel a sense of aloneness and abandonment, and then sometime, somehow God is revealed. God's face becomes known and

seen and what joy and delight God and God's people feel, as they make that contact, when the relationship is restored again.

Isaiah knows what is needed....He leads the people in confession. Repentance needs to happen. They had sinned...big time, for a long time, in fact they had been at it for so long, they weren't sure there was any hope for them. Even their best attempts at doing right and living righteous lives didn't seem good enough, they had pretty much given up. They didn't pray to God, they didn't reach out to God. God's face was hidden from them. They were left to deal with their own sinfulness.

But confession does something. Confession clears the way for God's love to work and for restoration and healing to take place. In almost a childlike way, they appeal to God, recognizing that they can't save themselves. They need God. They are God's people. They are in this together...parent-child. They know they don't deserve what they are asking. They are aware of their shameful past, but they appeal to God, not to remember their past for ever, not to be angry with them forever...to give them another chance. For God created them, God formed them. God shaped them and molded them, as a potter molds the clay.

The last verse of chapter 64 addresses the very heart of God when Isaiah says, "Will you keep silent and punish us severely?" One final plea is made to the one who can help.

Joyce Rupp, in her book, **Praying Our Goodbyes**, writes these words when she talks about how sometimes God is silent and we do not have a feeling of God's nearness.

At these times God says to us, "Keep believing in the greening, in the springtime of your heart. I know that it feels as though I am far away from you but I am closer to you than your next breath. On your weary days, just come and sit by the well of life with me. I will stay with you. On your discouraged days, remember that I yearn to fill your life with joy. It will return to you in time. On your days when you feel the ache will never go away, press your pain against me and know that I surround you with an everlasting love. Draw you strength and energy from me. I will sustain you in this wintry, dark time." (p.82-83)

In the act of lament and anguished pleas to God, troubles do not instantly vanish. Doubts don't disappear, contradictions and tensions aren't immediately resolved. Yet we trust that God will hear us, that God will not abandon us, that God will not remain silent forever. We do not know when the glory of God will be made visible to us. We do not know when or where light may break through the darkness. We believe it can happen. We believe in what we can see, but sometimes we are asked to believe in what we cannot see!

And so this Advent we wait....we wait expectantly. We wait for God to show us his face. So, **Pay Attention, Be alert, Watch!** With Isaiah, we cried out our frustrations, we vented our pain and pent up emotions, we confessed our sins and recognized our failures. We come before God, open, yielded, ready, willing to trust again. Shine on your people, O Lord, in the darkness and into the light and may our faces reflect the light of God, as we welcome the Divine to dwell among us.

*Restore us, O God;
make your face shine upon us
that we may be saved. (Ps. 80:3)*