

November 27, 2011

“Walking the Advent Path”

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Walking the Advent Path

Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37
Advent 1 B

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett
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A certain man once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. He got nervous and tense about it. He wrote, "I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day. Before long, things around our home started reflecting the patter of my hurry-up style. It was becoming unbearable.

"I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.'

"Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered, 'Honey, you can tell me -- and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly.'" "I'll never forget her answer: 'Then listen slowly.'"ⁱ

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and the first day of a new Christian year. As we begin this new year, I invite us to listen slowly and be attentive.

The liturgical season of Advent is intended to slow us down and help us prepare ourselves to receive Christ again in our world and in our lives. In the darkest time of year we clear a way for light to shine – the light of Jesus Christ.

As we approach the shortest day of the year, we are bold to light Advent Candles that mark the four Sundays of Advent and which defy darkness by proclaiming Jesus as the light of the world.

This year I want us to frame Advent with attentiveness. As we walk the Advent path, I encourage us to slow down and be attentive: attentive to people in our lives, attentive to nature, attentive to the world, attentive to need, attentive to hope.

You might expect *repent* for Advent, but you might not expect *lament*. That's not what we usually think of for this season.

Readings from the prophet Isaiah are always part of the Advent scripture texts. Isaiah, the prophet whose words form much of Handel's Messiah, prophesies of the savior to come. We who are Christian believe Jesus is that Messiah.

The book of Isaiah spans a huge period of time, more time than one person could live. At least three prophets compose the work of the book that bears the name of Isaiah.

The time frame for this portion of the book is probably the exile when the Israelites were captive in Babylon after the destruction of their temple, their city, their home. It is also possible this was written very early during their return to Jerusalem, as they faced the realities of the destruction and what it meant to rebuild.

This passage from Isaiah is part of a lament. When you hear the word lament, you may think of words like complain, mourn, weep, and cry out. But Lament is more than that.

Because we live in a culture that is oriented to individualism, it isn't easy to grasp the collective nature of our faith ancestors. Lament to them was a communal experience that had a certain shape and form to it.

It was corporate worship with music and ritual for the purpose of Lamenting.

Our Bible is full of Laments, not only in Lamentations, but also the Psalms and other texts. More than half of the Psalms are laments.

One scholar explains, “Lament is communal sorrow about the brokenness of life. Lament is communal protest about the presence of evil. ... Praise results from lament. Sorrow makes rejoicing possible. Pain gives way to joy because trouble does not last always. Praise is the communal voice of the people lifted in the presence of God and in light of the reality of the world as it is. Praise needs lament to have power just as lament needs praise to be genuine.”ⁱⁱ

What constitutes a lament? A lament begins by addressing God, even if the complaint is God’s absence. There is a description of the trouble or distress of the worshippers as well as a plea for God to redeem the ones praying from the destitute condition that produced the turmoil or anxiety. Then comes a statement of confidence in God and a final plea.ⁱⁱⁱ

The lament in Isaiah begins in Chapter 63:7 and goes through 64:12. Today’s reading is just a small portion of the whole lament.

To get just a flavor of it, I’ll read from Isaiah 63:7: “I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord had done for us...” verse 8: “For God said, ‘surely they are my people,’” verse 9 – “God’s presence saved them...and redeemed them.”

Then comes the kicker: verse 15: “Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me.”

This is a people who feel abandoned! They were captured, taken into exile in a foreign land. They lost everything. They believed God caused this to happen and that God hardened their hearts and caused their sin.

The prophet minces no words. With the beginning of today’s reading in chapter 64:1 the prophet yells at God – “Tear open the heavens and come down here right now!... Come and be with us like you used to! You have left us alone and we can’t stand it.”

What a lament it is. But the power of the lament is the engagement with God. Do you see it? Isaiah is not passive trying to comfort the people saying, “There, there, God works in mysterious ways...don’t question God’s ways, my child...just trust and it will all be all right.”

No, that’s not what Isaiah said. Isaiah thundered to the sky – “You come out right now! Enough of this!” Isaiah was not going to let the people become defeated and cold-hearted. He described them in verse 6 as a filthy cloth or a dry leaf that the wind will take away.

Have you known times when you felt abandoned by God? Have you ever wanted to shout to the sky, “Come down here right now...we have to talk!” I have! The aching loneliness, the burning inside when tragedy strikes, the flatness of self when loss robs you... “where is that God that was there for everybody else?”

Our culture has a hard time with sorrow, despair and pain. We don’t want it to last too long, and so we are quick to move out of it to “get on with life.” We are quick to get things back to normal as soon as possible.

Kathleen O’Conner, Professor of Old Testament writes, “Our cultural propensity to deny pain cuts us off from ourselves, our passions, and our inner courage for resistance and praise. It silences our voices. To be open to others’ desperation at home and abroad requires openness to one’s own sorrows. One sure sign of our lack of compassion is the denial and trivializing of our own pain. Honoring pain, giving it its due, is not narcissism or egocentric foolishness. It is rather faithful acknowledgment of its power to diminish life. To honor pain means to face it truthfully, perhaps in a long spiritual process.

“Lament invites us to speak the truth, to resist, to become moral agents. It urges upon us a spirituality that pays attention not only to what is beautiful and nourishing in the world, but to all reality, including devastation, brutality, and hatred. It urges lament for everything that prevents the full flourishing of life on this planet. Only then can we offer genuine praise. Our humanity depends upon it.”^{iv}

We begin this season walking the Advent path being attentive to the brokenness in the world. In this world the disparity between those who eat and those who hunger is great and growing.

In this world the AIDS epidemic continues to ravage people, families, & whole communities. Sub-Saharan Africa, our sisters and brothers, continue to suffer in huge numbers. The lament should be loud and global.

Part of a continent is being decimated – in part because of denial about the disease.

In this world fear and revenge grip our imagination more than God’s promise of a beautiful creation where diversity is a blessing, reflecting the very creator. Instead we are suspicious of people who believe differently or look differently.

Be attentive – to our world – God’s world.

Be attentive to the world’s pain – to your own pain.

Be attentive to the movement of the spirit...

So how do we begin this Advent? Despite the gaps we in the church and world have created between us and God, we express our faith this Advent that God has not given up on us. We reach out for God along the Advent path and discover God has been embracing us with love all along.

There is a three letter word in today's reading that is a very big word. Isaiah makes abundantly clear that God has ample evidence to give up on us. Then in verse 8 he speaks the word---YET. "Yet O lord, you are our mother and father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands."

"Yet" is a word we carry with us in hope. When our own limitations, narrowness and sin convince us that God has more than enough evidence against us---individuals, churches and nations---we will say the

one-word-prayer that expresses hope, "Yet."

It is a reminder to God and us that we are the people in whom God has invested much. For God has taken flesh among us; Jesus is our sign that God will not give up on us. Jesus is "God's Yet"--the restoring pause in the cycle of our downward spiral that allows God's mercy to step in.^v

When we are attentive to the pain in the world, the pain within ourselves, rather than turn away from God, or turn away from the faith community, the power of lament is that it turns us towards God and towards one another.

In lament we raise our concerns and we name our pain. We engage God. We call God out...and that alone is an act of faith for if we did not believe that God is the potter and we are the clay, why then, would we shout at the heavens?

Yet, O God, we are all the work of your hand.

Come Savior Jesus – into our lives – into this world – restore us by your grace – give us compassion and love to share...and help us listen slowly.

ⁱ *Bits & Pieces*, June 24, 1993, pp. 13-14.

ⁱⁱ Keith A Russell, *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 11 No. 4 p. 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, 1993 Trinity Press International, pp. 2-3.

^{iv} Kathleen O'Conner, *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 11 No. 4 pp. 7-9.

^v FIRST IMPRESSIONS by Fr. Jude Siciliano, O.P.

Not cited but recommended: Ann Weems, *Psalms of Lament*, 1995, Westminster John Knox Press.

Forward by Walter Brueggemann is on the nature of lament.

Ms. Weems wrote 50 laments following the death of her 21-year old son.