

Advent 2011

Every time you take your seat in these pews, I wonder, if in the back of your mind, there is the question: "Is there a word from the Lord today?"

I think, for everyone here, that question whispers itself, to the conscious or unconscious mind.

"Is there a word from the Lord today?"

It is the question on my mind each and every week as the struggle to hear what ought to be said consumes waking and sleeping hours.

And while sometimes the word comes as sunshine and laughter, at other times the word comes as a kind of terrifying hope.

Sometimes, the teaching is a hard one.

Like today's teaching, when the Word of the Lord seems to propel us from the ancient past right into today's headlines.

Did you hear the first line of the very first reading?

The lament cried out by the prophet Isaiah, a lament that echoes down through the ages:

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

I heard that lament ringing in my ears as I read the headline a few days ago about the super committee that wasn't so super after all.

That's the gang that was supposed to get our nation's finances in order.

They didn't.

Or the nonstop stories of how our political machinery has frozen solid at the national level.

Or how we are bogged down in a war now in its 10th year in a country even Genghis Khan gave up on.

We face reductions in military spending of 10% a year over the next decade and wrists are being slit over this outrage, even though we spend more on the military than the rest of the world combined.

And if that's not enough, let our gaze drift farther afield.

Egypt is on fire.

Somalia is ruled by armed thugs.

Iran threatens to destroy Israel, and Israel continues to poke sticks in the eyes of Palestinians with ever more aggressive settlements.

And so this first Sunday of Advent, the prophet so fittingly cries out in sorrowful lament:

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

A plea first cried as Isaiah’s king set Israel on a course for disaster – it is a plea as pressing today as it was then.

Rather than being a time of Christmas carols and holiday cheer, Advent is, for us, a time of taking stock, of recollection, and of anticipation.

It’s why you see your church and your clergy decked out in purple, after so many months of green or white.

Purple is a sign for royalty to be sure; but it is also a sign of bruises, bruises that come so naturally in a world where humanity pretends to be God.

During Advent, we are invited to remember that left to our own devices, our goose is as cooked as yesterday’s turkey, as Yogi Berra once said.

Where can we turn for help?

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

Such is the prayer of the church every Advent season, it is a longing for the often silent, seemingly absent God, to show his face, in ways that are unmistakable, bold and convincing.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

It is a lament that also says much about how we understand God's relationship to us.

It is the common view that God is to be found somewhere “up there.”

Many of us have a picture of that God, sitting on the sidelines of the world, peering over the rails on the 50-yard line, maybe a bag of popcorn in hand, watching what we're up to.

And yet, on this first Sunday of Advent, as we gather in the midst of so much strife, so much acrimony, so much fear, we Christians are coaxed to remember that the old way of thinking, of God "up there," has changed.

I'm reading Eli Wiesel's first book.

He calls it "Night."

It is the story of when Wiesel was a youngster, barely in his teens, when the Nazi's came to his small village in Transylvania and kidnapped every Jewish child, woman and man, and in railroad cars barely suited for cattle, delivered these human beings into the furnaces and slave lines of Auschwitz.

It is a book one can read only slowly, just a few pages at a time.

It was during holocaust that the Jewish people came face to face with where to look for God: was God "up there" or was God somewhere else?

Some answered that God was neither up there nor somewhere else.

The horror of holocaust was the end of faith for many.

For others, perhaps even Wiesel himself, God was found in the very midst of incomprehensible suffering.

Wiesel recounts the horrifying day that the Nazis hanged several young boys, boys who took a long time to die on the gallows.

An old man yelled out in the midst of this horror: "Where is God?!"

And Wiesel heard his heart answer: "God is there, hanging on the gallows."

Advent is the time we gather together to remember, to re-experience, that ours is a God who gets down in the muck with us.

We will hear it in the coming weeks.

“He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our back on him and looked the other way. He was despised and we did not care.”

Isaiah chapter 53, verse 3.

And we will hear this: it is the response to Isaiah's king who wanted God to provide an army to Israel.

Rather than an army, the prophet saw that:

“The Lord himself will give you a sign. The young woman will conceive a child and give birth to a son; she will name him Immanuel, God with us.”

Isaiah chapter 7, verse 14.

Rather than an army, God gives a child.

Rather than brute force, our God is with us in weakness.

For reasons we may perhaps someday come to understand, the Living God chooses not to enter our lives from a high and mighty place, but at the edges, in the midst of what is troubling, confusing, even confounding.

The Living God is a gentle God, not rescuing us from life's travails but walking with us through all that comes.

As folks line up in the early morning hours to get the best deal at BestBuy, we are called to look for a star, the sign of he who is coming.

As the powers and principalities invite us into the wilderness of fake cheer and blown budgets, we are invited to kneel quietly in prayer, that we might be filled with the peace of God.

As nations continue to rattle sabers and politicians worship at the altar of redemptive violence, we gather together to remember who we are, to commit ourselves yet again to become a people created by the suffering God who is nearer to you than your breath – this suffering God, who brings the dead to life!

Is there a word from the Lord today?

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