

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
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Isaiah 64:1-9

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins. Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.

Advent has begun with a candle lit for hope, with greens in the sanctuary stories about decorating traditions and lovely music. Advent has begun with this intergenerational worship service where young people read and help beautify our worship space and afterwards, where people gather for an Advent craft activity. We are here together this morning to mark the start of Advent -- a season that is more, much more, than simply four Sundays leading up to Christmas.

And today, after the benediction has been spoken the final choral response sung while some of you make your way downstairs for coffee hour and for Advent craft activity some of us, the members of the confirmation class and a handful of the mentors, will make our way across town square to the John Robinson Center. We've been doing lots of interesting things in confirmation class so far – exploring our denomination, the UCC and the bible too but today is a class meeting I've been looking forward to for quite a while for today four mentors – Mark Coombs, Chris Bates, Dawn Durmis and Cathy Sampson – will share something of their faith journey in a panel discussion format.

Why have I been so looking forward to this? Because something powerful happens when we listen. When we hear something of the particular life experiences of others, how those experiences shaped them, how those experiences moved them and formed them I believe we ourselves, we who listen, can also be shaped and transformed.

Recently one of the mentors asked how honest to be in the sharing. Very honest I said. We learn from your real life, not your life made all nice and clean and pretty. But as you share the real stuff, the hard stuff, the gritty stuff just don't forget to tell us where you found guidance and hope. The kids, I said, they'll be interested to know that.

One of the reasons I love Advent is because it is so very honest. Many of the scriptures for Advent offer lament – this deep sense that our world is not as it should be, that we as a people are off kilter, and that our world, so grand and beautiful has been marred and disfigured by things that bring great sorrow to our hearts, and most certainly to the heart of God. A good word for Advent is *desire*. In Advent we get in touch with God's deepest desires. We also get in touch with our deepest desires – not for more stuff, not for more parties, but for more connection – with God and with one another.

Yesterday I got a phone call from a friend who is often very busy. With it being the season, she was already sounding....well, breathless. I recognized it, because having just returned from doing errands, I was feeling some that way myself. I read her something I think I'd like to share with you. It is called the nun's twenty third psalm And it feels like a good way for Advent to begin.

*The Lord is my pace-setter, I shall not rush. God makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals. God provides me with images of stillness, which restore my serenity. God leads me in ways of efficiency through calmness of mind. Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day, I will not fret, for God's presence is here. God's timelessness, God's all-importance will keep me in balance. God prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity by anointing my mind with oils of tranquility. My cup of joyous energy overflows. Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruit of my hours for I shall walk in the place of my Lord, and dwell in God's House forever. (as found in Guide My Feet: Prayers and Meditations for our Children, Marian Wright Edelman)*

Can I get an "amen" to that?

Our scripture lesson today begins with an honest lament to a God envisioned on high, a God who has seemed detached and hidden because things aren't going all that well. Oh God, we are in a mess down here, can't you come and pay us a visit and turn things around? Some, thinking of politics and scandal, might be feeling this today. The passage, however ends with a more earthy affirmation: of a God who is with us already, nearby, loving us day by day like a parent. Tending to us with great attention, like an artist working on her creation.

Where we think of God as residing matters. If God is up there, far off, then maybe we just muddle through here until we get to another place, when our lives are over, up there, and this is just a trial run so in the end the shape of our world, or even our

souls doesn't matter that much. But if God is here, which is, after all, the story of Jesus *God here with us* then what happens here matters very much.

And if God is here with us, if that is the essential message of the season, then what does this say about our seasonal preparations? Will we wear ourselves out trying to cram in every concert, party, and holiday event? Or will we put ourselves in places where we know God is somehow more likely to reside – the hospital room, the lonely person's living room, the homeless overnight program, or right there in the seat beside the shy or awkward person in the school lunch room? This Advent will we seek to extend hospitality in ways that are simple, unflashy, in ways that aim to comfort and encourage rather than dazzle and impress? If God is here with us, what *difference* does that make in our lives, in who we make time for?

Here's another question: if God is here with us, where does God desire to be *most here*? Jesus was not born in a palace, but born in a lowly cattle stall. Likewise, over and over scripture – scripture well before Jesus time and in the words that came from his own mouth – scripture, the words of our bible, emphasize God's preferential concern for the poor. It begins with the prophets and runs right through to the letter to James, which names true religion as “caring for the widow and the orphan in their difficulty” (James 1:26)

If we are like most congregations, there sit amongst us people of very differing views about the direction our government is currently going. What might God who is here, this God who cares so deeply for the poor and oppressed, be thinking about our currently proposed tax reform? How will this tax bill, if it goes into effect, change the lives of those most vulnerable, the lives of those who truly struggle to pay their bills? This week twelve pastors, members of the Sojourners community, got arrested when they held a peaceful protest in the Senate building in Washington D.C. They stood and read scripture – there are so many scriptures, two thousand in fact – that speak to God's deep concern for the wellbeing of all people. What will happen if rather than a big economic bounce for everyone this tax bill creates more hardship, more poverty, more despair? What will happen if, in the interest of comfort or even unity, the church remains silent and refuses to engage these issues?

We love our Advent traditions, the greening of our church, the nativity display and Open House, the caroling and gorgeous choral music. It comforts us. The season comforts us. Yet in times like these, we must remember it is because God so loved the world that Jesus came to it, that Jesus was born into it. And he came to comfort *and* to challenge (as the prophets before him had challenged) so we could live in deeper connection with God and with each other. So despite our deep need for comfort, we mustn't seek comfort that cuts off all questions, questions that will naturally arise when we look at our world through the lens of scripture and through the personhood of Jesus Christ.

And so Advent begins. May the questions keep rising, and may we not be afraid.

Amen.