

## **Sermon Advent I Year B November 27, 2011**

In the season of Advent we often hear from the prophet Isaiah. To help with my reflection this morning I am borrowing some thoughts of Dr. Mickey Anders of Lexington, KY. In Liturgical Year B that we begin today we find that Isaiah is no longer a young man. Here he is an old man who has returned with his people from exile. They returned to a city in ruin, a temple in ruin, and their lives in ruin. These were dark days for the people of Israel. So Isaiah pours out this lament, pleading for God to "tear open the heavens" once again. He is longing for God to act. Standing in the rubble of a lost temple, amid the ruins of a lost faith, he cries out for God to be visible instead of hidden.

In verse seven, he proclaims, "For you have hidden your face from us." Earlier in verse five, he tries to blame the people's sin on God's absence, "because you hid yourself we transgressed."

This bleak passage from Isaiah is actually a great one for beginning the Advent season because it is so filled with an eagerness, a yearning for God to act. This yearning would not really be answered until the birth of Christ. But that is a good model for us as we prepare for Christmas ourselves. We need to reflect on the deep need we have for Christ. The coming of Christ filled a deep need in the people, and still does.

Can you identify with these words of Isaiah about the hidden-ness of God? I suspect that most of us can. Have you ever stood amid the ruins of your faith and prayed, but felt like you were only talking to yourself? Have you ever stood beside the bed of one in pain and prayed for God's help, but felt that God was far away? Have you ever felt that God had been hidden for too long?

Have you ever wanted God to do something, something like "tear open the heavens and come down?" All of us have felt that way at one time or another.

Perhaps those are the people who are struggling the most to get ready for Christmas. How can you properly enjoy Christmas when you feel that God is absent? How can you experience the presence of God when all you know now is the hidden-ness of God?

And the reason is that the absence has a presence about it. The absence of God is not a void, as if there were no God. God's absence has a shape about it. And that shape is Jesus Christ.

Isaiah suggests this theme in chapter 9 when he says, "The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light." When are we more aware of the light than in a time of darkness? What is the old expression "It's darkest just before the dawn." Living in the darkness is just the right preparation for seeing the light.

There are many people who struggle to get themselves in the proper Christmas spirit. Many churches recognize this reality by planning "Blue Christmas" services, such as we will do on December 18, especially for people who are grieving. These people are struggling with the dark side of life and have real trouble making themselves feel cheery, as seems required.

But Isaiah would argue that those are the very people who are most prepared for Christmas. We are ready for the light only when we have sat a while in the darkness. We are ready for the presence of God only when we have experienced the absence of God.

I am coming to know something of what this feels like right now. This has been a year of much sickness and loss all around us. I'm still feeling the effects of the deaths of Donna Fish, Francine Gagnon, Steve Ducharme and my favorite aunt—Julie Kolanowski who at 64 died of a rare form of cancer. And just last week Maureen French's mother died.

And now, the most important woman in my life, my mom who I totally worship, who has been my rock through my whole life has incurable cancer, has had a stroke that has left her without the ability to communicate much with us, has had open heart surgery and just this week a mild heart attack on top of that—all in less than two months. I feel like I'm sitting in the darkness.

It makes it tough since I have three little kids who are getting Christmas fever—but even in the midst of this sadness and darkness maybe it's their fever for joy that is bringing bits of light already. Maybe it's the transformation of my father from someone who wasn't such a great husband into an amazing caregiver that is helping me see God's presence when it feels like God is absent. I don't know. What I do know from this past year is that even in the midst of what feels like God's absence I can also point to those very times that God chooses to make God's presence known in small, subtle yet powerful ways, which you've heard me talk a lot about in these past several weeks.

For me this reading from Isaiah about a desperate prophet yearning for God to reveal himself, is what Advent is truly all about. It's not the cute baby in the manger being revealed—but it's God's very self being revealed in the person of Jesus who came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. It's God continuing to reveal God's self and to come to us in moments of darkness and despair lifting us up with a presence that is the true gift of Christmas.

While much of the attention at Christmas time is a looking back at a story of angels, shepherds and wise men—we enter advent each year to begin anew to wait for Christ's return—a return like we hear in Matthew's gospel of powerful apocalyptic visions—and a return into our hearts—a God revealing God's self in the very places of absence, darkness and despair.

So maybe that's why the church has the season of Advent in the weeks before Christmas. If we are to see the fragile light which dawns among us in Christ, we must sit awhile in the darkness. If we are to hear the songs of the angels, we must first be silent. If we are to know the presence of God, we must first sense the absence of God. Amen.