

## Restore and Save Us Now!

### 1 – The Songs of Christmas

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalms 80

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

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First Sunday of Advent

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So the Season washes over us, catching us off guard, suddenly and unprepared. Turkey still undigested, thrill and agony of Iron Bowl only a few hours behind us. Squeezed into this busy Thanksgiving Holiday Weekend comes the plaintive Advent cry, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel.” “Come and save us! Restore us, let your face shine, that we may be saved.”<sup>1</sup> The Advent plea for God to come, and act. The Advent warning for us to prepare, wait, watch, and wonder. None of these virtues come naturally to us. We’re, “we want what we want when we want it,” folks.

The larger culture is not much help. Advent is a season of the Church, believers who listen to the warnings and promises of the prophets, the announcements of the angels, the response of a young peasant couple who take God’s word to heart and get up and go to Bethlehem at the most inconvenient time. Meanwhile the culture is already playing secular Christmas carols, making sales, leaping past all sense of watchful waiting and prayerful expectation with 1001 diversions. The culture says, if there is any sense of God’s presence, he is either so covered over with holiday mirth and busyness or else so taken for granted – well yes He’s here, but not really here. He is really gone, far away from us, the man upstairs. So that none really expect him, none cry for him, none not seek him, and certainly, none not make room for him. So happy holidays, whatever they are.

But the people of God do expect, cry, seek, and make room for God. The people of God listen to a different script, read off a different play book, than the midnight store openings as soon as Thanksgiving turns into the day after, as if we could shop ourselves out of our sadness and fear and emptiness and cosmic alienation. The people of God listen to a different story than the grim news of budget woes and super committee failure, local sewer bankruptcy, harshest immigration laws in the country, and quick fixes that pin everything on the next presidential election as if whoever is elected will repair all that ails us.

No, the people of God look to a different King and pray for a different Savior, to come and dwell among us, heal us of our diseases, fix our brokenness, and restore to us wholeness, giving, meaning, hope, direction and purpose in our lives. The people of God take time and make space to remember the sacred story, the promises, the experiences of local shepherds and foreign kings, who come to see this infant in Bethlehem, and elderly friends in the Jerusalem Temple who look upon him shortly after his birth and know precisely who they are looking at. Then one –Simeon- can pray contentedly,

“Master, now let thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou has prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.”<sup>ii</sup>

And another – Anna – 84 year old prophetess –

“She came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”<sup>iii</sup>

Advent belongs to the Church. The people of God know the offerings of the culture, fun and festive as they are, office parties, dances, brunches, all the rest, are not enough. Not bad – just not enough. You would not want to hand your soul over to the care of some department store, even Macys, would you - because, well you drive by the empty malls and vacant buildings. You know how transient even the strongest human institutions are. You know how quickly life can change, the market drop, the catastrophic medical diagnosis come, the marriage turns sour, the sure thing deal turn to bankruptcy. The culture offers us either a world without God, Frosty the Snowman, Season’s Greetings, or else a world with only a superficial God, “Remember the reason for the season,” a God who comes for an hour once a year, watches as we light a candle and sing a carol, then returns to his heaven and leaves us to our fate. We cry out for the real thing, “O come, Lord, come. Restore and save us now.” Invigorate us. Transform us. Use us.

So this first Sunday of Advent we dive off the high board, not into a sweet syrupy White Christmas, but into a broken world and a broken church with broken lives plaintively pleading for God - who seems to have abandoned Israel and sometimes seems, to have abandoned us – to come and show himself, not simply to impress but to save. Isaiah pleads, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” Isaiah prays, not simply for some old same old routine, another Advent, another Christmas cycle, but come, really come with power and might,

“so that the mountains would quake at your presence – as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil – to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.”<sup>iv</sup>

Isaiah addressed an exiled people, Israel, sometime within between 580 and 530 B.C. when their Temple and their nation have been left in ruins and the best and brightest have been taken away to servitude in Babylon. The sense of absence is palpable. Like Japan, like Germany during occupation after the Second World War. Like displaced Jews after that war – those few who survived the Holocaust. The longing intense. The yearning passionate. Come O God, we feel detached and withered, like a dried leaf, but we know, we know you are our Father. We know deep down you have not abandoned us, so come to us. Come to us.

The Psalmist of Psalm 80 three times asks God to come; come and save, come and renew, come and show your face. Remember God's face was never seen by the people in Hebrew Scripture. No graven images. No painting or snapshot of God, the Holy One. Before Jesus Christ, who showed us the face of God,<sup>v</sup> God's presence remained hidden behind the curtain in the Temple. For should God come with no filter between himself and his people we all would be undone. Remember that scene in "Raiders of the Lost Ark" when the Nazis had carted off the Ark of the Covenant they had stolen, and some of them decided to peek in and see what they could find. They were vaporized for their curious impertinence. People do not wisely mess with a Holy God.

But gradually this Holy God started showing himself in measured ways, and by progressive steps to his people Israel. He led them from Egyptian slavery, giving them manna and quail in the wilderness for forty years. He established them in Canaan, the land of promise. Ah land, now they have property, and they begin to raise crops and animals and eventually get a king like all the other nations. And the cycle of faith and failure continues, until God decides to show himself as never before or since in the fullness of time.

"The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth."<sup>vi</sup>

"The God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'"<sup>vii</sup>

Which is where all our Advent hope moves us. We are waiting for Jesus Christ. Psalm 80 echoes this intense longing. This year we are focusing especially on the Song of Christmas. Psalms offer foundation for the music of the Season. They are the Hebrew hymnbook. Sometimes music communicates even where words fail. More truth of God is conveyed through music – hymns and anthems, than through a four foot high stack of systematic theology texts. The Psalms were often and still are set to music. Like Psalm 80 which we sang. Poetically it has three stanzas, each summarized with this plea for God to come and do what God has promised, save us, restore us, shine your face upon us.

## I

The first stanza begins with respectful remembering of God as the "Shepherd of Israel." "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who led Joseph like a flock!" Here is a familiar image, "The Lord is my shepherd." Shepherds and sheep were as routine in biblical times as dogs and cats and firemen and policemen are in our times. The Psalmist begins with a believing affirmation addressing God as our shepherd, and also as the one in charge on the throne. "You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth, stir up your might, and come to save us!"<sup>viii</sup> This Shepherd King is addressed in light of those attributes and asked to hear us, come to us, have a care for us.

We do that in our prayers don't we? We ask God, sometimes we beg, we scream for God, to listen to us, to enter into our situation, to come through the curtain and step out of heaven and into our world and help us.

It is one thing to believe that God is all powerful, omnipotent, glorious in holiness, full of grace and truth. It is another for God to notice us, involve himself in our situation, feel our pain, bear our burden. The Psalmist recognizes that life is not so good these days. Exile is filled with confusion, displacement, lack of home and hearth. Here, to begin with, is a respectful plea for the Shepherd-King on the throne to have a care and give an ear to our broken condition.

“Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

## II

But then in the second stanza there is recognition of just how hard life in exile has been and how far away God seems. “How long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.”<sup>x</sup>

Biblical faith is it is realistic and real. People of faith feel intimate enough with God to shout and argue and cry out in the face of life's struggles and injustices. Prayer is passionate pleading, sometimes in ways you might not feel comfortable saying in church. But God can handle it. God can receive our pouring out our hearts in anger and disappointment and sadness. So when life is hard, take it to God direct. What God cannot endure is play acting.

“Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”<sup>x</sup>

## III

The final stanza the image changes from Shepherd to vintner, us and the vine that God planted out in his field. “Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven, and see, have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted.”<sup>xi</sup> This chosen vine has suffered, the walls of the vineyard broken down, the field left defenseless. Wild boars have ravaged it, and rabbits and foxes and field mice, everything in the field nibbles away at this vine. Do you ever feel like that? Yet the precious vine, the chosen vine, “have regard for the vine,”<sup>xii</sup> O God.

Amid our depression, discouragement, desperation and defeat, the Psalmist prays for us, “Give us life, and we will call on your name.” There, that's it! Isn't that what we are praying for this Advent? Give us life! Healthy life, meaningful life, purposeful life, fulfilling life. Give the church, this world and this nation life! What Advent gives us is an opportunity to come to terms with what is really important. For when you get one of those big life-changing jolts, suddenly the bumper sticker that says “the one who dies with the most toys wins” is visible for the lie that it is. They say, you never see a hearse with a u-haul tied behind it.

“Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

## IV

This Advent won't you open yourself to God at a new level? Pray with the Psalmist and mean it, "Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved." What we sing and read and prayer and experience here – what we share in bread and wine at this table here – is a new dose of life, real life grounded in the eternal love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who comes to offer us life in all its fullness.

This Advent let us watch, let us wait, let us plead for God to come, let us expect God to come. Let us grow in our expectation that he will come. Keep awake, be ready. Watch.

"Our hope and expectation, O Jesus, now appear! Arise, Thou Son so longed for, over this benighted sphere! With hearts and hands uplifted, we plead, O Lord to see The day of earth's redemption that brings us unto Thee."<sup>xiii</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Psalm 80:2,19

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 2: 29-32

<sup>iii</sup> Luke 2: 36-38

<sup>iv</sup> Isaiah 64:1-3.

<sup>v</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:6

<sup>vi</sup> John 1:14

<sup>vii</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:6

<sup>viii</sup> Psalm 80:1-2

<sup>ix</sup> Psalm 80:4-6

<sup>x</sup> Psalm 80:7

<sup>xi</sup> Psalm 80:14,15

<sup>xii</sup> Psalm 80:15

<sup>xiii</sup> The Presbyterian Hymnal, "Rejoice, Rejoice Believers", 15