

Year B
First Sunday of Advent
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
Isaiah 64:1-9
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

It's the first Sunday of Advent—the time of waiting for the coming of Jesus the Christ. We light the first purple candle, and begin to prepare ourselves for the celebration of Christmas. But the Advent lessons don't seem to be very cheerful, do they? You might remember that Advent used to be a penitential season, and that's why we traditionally use purple as the liturgical color. It was a time for fasting, waiting and preparation for Christmas, and the lessons still reflect that. The lessons are reminding us that we really need a savior. The world is in trouble. We need Jesus.

Psalm 80 reflects this strongly. It is a psalm of lament, and a psalm of hurt. It voices feelings that we all might have had at one time or another: God, are you listening? God, save us! God, how long will it be until you answer our prayer? The psalmist begins by comparing God to a shepherd, but this is not the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23. “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,/...Stir up your might,/ and come to save us!” The speaker feels bereft—as if God has left the people. This feeling of being bereft is one that I've often had people express to me, especially when things are traumatic. One woman told me that she felt so far from God the day she got her stage 4 cancer diagnosis. “I reach out to God, and there is nothing—nothing,” she said. “I always used to feel God's presence, but now when I need him most, there is nothing—nothing at all.” Another woman, whose young son was hit and killed by a car, was torn between wanting to rage at God, and feeling like she might get struck down if she did. “I can't question God's plan,” she said. I showed her some of the psalms of lament, and assured her that faithful people have been questioning God's plan for thousands of years.

In fact, voicing those questions, and those emotions to God is exactly the thing to do. Crying out with the psalmist, “Restore us, O God;/let your face shine that we may be saved,” shows great faith in God's power, even while it points up a current problem. A person who didn't believe in God, or in the Almighty's power would not bother to address God in this way. Remember the psalms were written to be sung during worship; so expressing these feelings is not inappropriate, even in God's own house. In fact, we know now that naming our emotions, and expressing how we feel helps us to process the trauma, or the grief itself, and begins to pave a way out of the crisis. It's actually good to tell God how bad you feel.

“O Lord God of Hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?” the psalmist asks. “You have fed them with the bread of tears,/ and given them tears to drink in full measure.” In this passage there isn't any idea of the sin of the people, or that they deserve God's absence for some kind of wrongdoing. Whatever terrible thing that has happened has taken place in **spite** of people's prayers. But that often seems to be the case, doesn't it? Bad things do happen to good people. It's not fair. I've been visiting a man in one of our COVID units whose wife is hospitalized with COVID in a different hospital. They can't visit each other, and their family

members can't visit either of them. This couple recently celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary—in their hospital beds, over the phone. How long, O Lord? How long?

This psalm voices the reality of human suffering, and it assumes that God will hear peoples' cries, and come to help. It is an expression of pain, but also of faith—and of courage. The people in this psalm are suffering, but they are brave enough to call upon the Lord for help. A man once told me that it was a terrible sin to question God's plan, and he wasn't going to ask for God's help. Everything happened for a reason, he said, and he was not going to question why his mother was dying, suddenly at age fifty-five. I didn't challenge his belief, because he was desperately clinging to it, and he really just needed someone to sit with him in his pain. But I submit to you that a lot of bad things happen randomly, or as a result of evil. Or as a result of poor choices on someone's part. This psalmist wants God to rectify this, and "Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;/ let your face shine, that we may be saved."

The fact that the psalm ends with those words gives us hope. Hope that God will, indeed save us. We need saving. We need Jesus—and this psalm points to that need today, this first Sunday of Advent. Jesus has already come, more than 2000 years ago, AND we await his coming in these four weeks.

During this Advent time I invite you to talk with God. Are you angry? Tell God about it. Are you despairing? Tell God about it. Are you grateful? Tell God about it. Do you feel like God has left you? Tell God about it. Do you feel like God is punishing you? Tell God about it. Whatever you can give over to God, God can handle. Whatever you do, stay connected, and watch for Jesus.

Amen