

Year B December 3, 2023

First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Isaiah 64:1-9

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

It's the first Sunday of Advent—the Church year's official time of waiting for the coming of Jesus the Christ. We light the first purple candle on the Advent wreath, and are told to prepare ourselves for the celebration of Christmas. But the Advent lessons don't seem to be very cheerful, do they? You might know that Advent used to be a penitential season, and that's why we traditionally use purple as the liturgical color. It used to be a time for fasting and penance, much like Lent, so that we could prepare ourselves for the gift and celebration that is Christmas. In some ways the readings still reflect that. But more than that, the lectionary reminds us that we are waiting, not only for the birth of the Savior, but simultaneously for the second coming of the Savior. And the second coming of the Savior happens at the end of the world, so we have readings that remind us about that, as well. Most of all, Advent reminds 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 heard people express, especially when things are traumatic. One woman said 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." A man I once spoke with, whose son was killed in a car accident, was torn between wanting to rage at God, and feeling like he might get struck down if he did. "I can't question God's plan," he said. My friends, 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. How is it fair for a woman in her thirties, with young children, to die suddenly of a stroke? How is it fair for children to be the casualties of senseless fighting? We can ask with the psalmist, 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 do it. Everything happened for a reason, he said, and he was not going to question why his kidneys were suddenly failing. 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 does give 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 AND we await his coming in glory at the end of time. It is all of these things, AND we can see him alive in the world today.

During this Advent time I invite you to slow down and think about all of this talk of *arrival*. Instead of falling into the constant beat of frantic, pre-Christmas preparation, take time to talk with God. Are you frantic? Stop a minute and talk to God about it. Are you angry? Rage to God. Are you despairing? Pour it out to God. Are you grateful? Give thanks to God. Do you feel like God has left you? Tell God about it. Do you feel like God is punishing you? Ask God why. Whatever you give to God, God can handle. And whatever you do, stay connected to God, and watch for Jesus’s coming in your own life. Amen

The Rev. Melanie Lewis  
Rector, Christ Church Millwood