

Spiritual Frustration & the Practice of Hope

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KOINONIA

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Spiritual Frustration & the Practice of Hope
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Isaiah 64:1-9

Pray

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, a liturgical season that escorts us to the wreath-covered front door of Christmas and gently ushers us across the threshold from barren winter to the light of the world. We count down days with Advent calendars. We sing “come oh come Emmanuel.” We do hanging of the greens. We light a new candle each week in worship to signify time gone by and closer proximity with the Christ child. Advent has standard operating procedures that come with it and as you can see: it’s fabulously color coordinated too! Some of the most breath-taking stuff of our religious tradition comes out at this time of year: best music, best symbolism, best theology.

But make no mistake about it, this isn’t an easy time or season.

You may hear the Advent weekly themes of hope, peace, love and joy and think: oh how lovely, how delightful, what uplifting and inspiring themes to focus on. But all of these themes come under the Advent umbrella of ‘waiting and anticipation,’ which is the true focus of our four week journey to Bethlehem. Waiting and anticipation.

It goes without saying that if you’re waiting for or anticipating something, it’s because that thing hasn’t arrived yet. Not yet. Waiting and anticipation are evidence of a particular reality: the reality that there is stuff to come. If Christmas brings the undeniable celebration of God’s incarnate presence in our midst—which it does—then

Advent ushers in Christmas' shadow side: God's undeniable absence. God isn't here. God is not around, not near by, not to be seen or heard or touched or felt. Not yet.

God is absent. And we are waiting.

Advent is the beautiful and burdensome spiritual season of "not yet." Waiting: that's our job this season. That's what we are called to be about as followers of Jesus this Advent.

Which is ironic because absolutely everything in our culture is saying "right now." Advent says "not yet" and crack-pipe consumerism says "buy it all...the Wii, the car, the toys, the tools, the lingerie, the light-up Santa's village for your front window, buy it all right now." Advent says "not yet" and flaming heterosexist commercials say "get married right now; every kiss begins with K." As my friend Jennette says, "yeah, and every divorce begins with D." Advent says "not yet" and every grocery store under the sun says "eat it all right now: the chocolate, the eggnog, the yams, the candy canes. Grub up, right now." Advent lightly whispers "not yet" when the culture is audaciously screaming "right now."

It can be frustrating to be part of a religious tradition that is asking you to wait patiently while the world is telling you to go go go and do do do. At this time of year our tradition says be quiet, be still, be reverent, sit and meditate with awe and wonder. The culture, on the other hand, says go to the festivals, the work parties, the family gatherings and concerts; do the dance, do the travel, do the expected ritual, do the cooking, do the gift-wrapping, do the frenzy because if you don't, you'll miss out! It can be frustrating, right?

Remember, it's beauty and struggle, and certainly not an easy time...this Advent thing. I think this tug and pull between Advent Waiting and Cultural Consumerism, the dichotomy between stillness and frenzy has been around a lot longer than we might assume. They are the polarities we face in the reality of barren winter, the options for response

we have in the reality of God's felt absence. Think about it: in those periods of your life when you have most concretely felt the absence of God, what were your options? (pause) Some of us tend to get real busy to avoid that absence. Some of us hibernate and get quiet, trying to figure it all out.

Either way, it is a real thing. These spiritual dry spells. This absence of God phenomenon. This "not yet" season that can come over our faith—and not just at Advent. Biblical authors refer to absence moments as wilderness times: times of in-between, times of wandering around, neither here nor there yet. Barbra Brown Taylor talks about them as times when God is silent. Whatever we call them, they are significant. Can't hear God. Can't feel God. Can't see God. Can't figure out why not. Can't pray sometimes. Just feel nothing. I'm not talking about crisis times, when things fall apart, when you feel too much. I'm talking about absent, not-yet times, times when things are just plotting along but something isn't here, something is missing.

Ever been there?

Well you're not alone because that's exactly what's being echoed in our scripture from Isaiah 64 this morning. A generation of people have returned to the city their parents talked about, a city their parents mourned for and held out hope for, a city that represented God's dwelling place. Zion: Israel's temple, the place that was crushed by the Babylonians before they rounded up all the Jews and forced them into exile. But now the children of the exiled are back in Jerusalem after having been rescued and released by King Cyrus of Persia. Instead of coming upon the dreamy landscape their parents and grandparents told them about, they come into rubble and ruin. They come into a land inhabited by Persians, a people who are foreign to them. They are tasked with rebuilding the Holy Temple but these foreign people keep sabotaging their efforts. They are tasked with reconstituting the community but some of their people keep co-habiting with people outside of Israel. It's

a frustrating time. They're not in severe crisis, they've come through worse times in Babylon. But they're not sitting pretty in the promised land of their ancestors either.

Naturally, they are frustrated. Did you pick that up in the text this morning? This is a frustrated people. Frustrated with themselves. Frustrated with their environment. Frustrated with God. Did you hear it, the frustration?

"You were angry and we sinned. Because you hid yourself, we transgressed."

"You have hidden your face from us and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity."

"We have all become like one who is unclean."

"We all fade like a leaf."

"There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you."

"Do not be exceedingly angry."

"Do not remember our iniquity forever."

"Consider, we are all your people."

Frustration. That's the main emotion that comes with the felt absence of God. And it's all up in our text this morning.

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At the apex of winter, when all is bare, when we are stripped and there is no light: we are forced to confront an absence that frustrates us. It is not solvable. It is not expendable. If we are in true relationship with God, we will be incapable of escaping such spiritual dry spells. Escaping into busyness and blame won't work. Escaping into isolation and denial won't work.

The only answer to these times is hope.

Practiced hope.

Fierce hope.

Embodied hope.

Hope is not something we feel. It's something we do. It's not an emotion; it's an action.

The first week of Advent, as we wait and anticipate, in the face of God's absence: our call is to wait as hopeful people. People who believe God is God and that it is in the nature of God to always be God, even when we don't feel her or see her or can't hear her.

And that's why I asked Abbey to come up here and light the candle of hope today. Abbey is high on my list of hopeful people. Meaning: she gives me hope. She gives me hope for the future of our world. Her commitment to being truthful, just, hard working, reliable, faithful and loyal remind me that there are in deed people of lasting integrity on this planet, that there are people worth loving and fighting for in this life, that there are fleshed images of God walking around this Earth with and beside me trying to do good, trying to do right and that I'm not alone. She gives me hope. On days when it feels like only unethical, reckless, inhumane, money-obsessed, life-and-earth-hating people are running the world to any effect, Abbey walks into my office or the sanctuary and I'm stirred out of my hopelessness. She gives me hope.

Which is ironic because she admitted to me yesterday that she's in a spiritual dry spell. That she's not feeling it lately. Not feeling God, not feeling church. Just not. And yet: she shows up to church and bible study each week. She serves at the Nursing Home up the street when we take worship there. She is involved in youth ministry and raked leaves for one of our members for hours last weekend. This is a person who practices hope, because she loves God, even when she's not feeling God. And here's the real power of it all: because she practices hope, even when she's not feeling God, somehow God's presence is made manifest through her. Even in the felt absence of God's presence in her life, she is able to give God's presence to others. I don't know how that happens, but I know it's a miracle and I know that's what Advent is all about.

Amen

