

## **November 29, 2020 TUMC Sermon - Advent I - On the road to readiness**

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Prayer of illumination:

Holy Spirit, open our hearts to receive your words. Amen.

(Come now oh God of peace we are your people

Pour out your Spirit that we be one body)

Isaiah 64:1-9

### **Holy Longings**

So here we are at Advent. We've never done this in a pandemic before, we've never done it in isolation, with bubbles, red zones, masks, loved ones we can't get together with, and all that.

Tensions are high in my circles, I imagine they are high in yours too. Tempers are flaring, patience is thin. Loneliness or loss of personal space are both taking their toll. (If it becomes unbearable, please ask for help.)

So how are we going to do this?

Several years ago, Marilyn Zehr and I attended a conflict transformation workshop that taught us a concept which has been very helpful, it's the idea of holy longings. I still remember the example that the workshop leader used. They talked about a church where folks were fighting, and threatening to leave the church (that most ubiquitous of all threats in pastoral ministry). Some people were furious about the Christmas hymns that were being sung (or not sung) at the Christmas Eve service. Yes, hymns, that was the big "issue" they were going to leave the church about.

The facilitator encouraged us to get beyond the surface of the conflict and to ask: "What are the holy longings behind this seemingly petty fight?" The idea is that at the heart of tensions, there is a core need or desire, a holy longing that even when the person themselves can't quite see it.

In this case it could be that those people had an emotional connection with a certain Christmas Carol, maybe it brought back memories of their happy childhood, or it could be that they liked every service to be the same and predictable and didn't like change, or it could be that they had a perfect vision of how Christmas is supposed to be in their minds and are striving for that Hallmark movie moment.

Holy longings. Marilyn and I started using this as a sort of code to try to understand and to call ourselves towards grace in difficult times. Framing discomfort and conflict in this way has been tremendously helpful. First of all it holds everyone in a conflict as holy, bearing God's image as we all do. It also recognizes that there are often legitimate and heartfelt reasons behind surface conflicts. And you may have noticed, that phrase, "holy longings," now keeps on cropping up at TUMC every once in a while. (Don't worry, I'm not preaching another sermon on conflict, Gary did this wonderfully a couple of weeks ago).

What I'm getting at is that Christmastime in our culture is full of holy longings! We long for that perfect ambiance that will make all family tensions disappear. That special meal that will include everyone's favourites. That gift that will be the perfect expression of love, good taste and practicality. The tree that will capture all the memories and have evenly displayed ornaments from years gone by. The perfect snow that will fall and turn everything into a beautiful dreamy scene with a soundtrack to back it up.

That is a tall order any year and I don't need to tell you that this year is different, right? In the midst of all the other tensions that always come up, we now need to renegotiate so many holy longings that we have about being together and about how Christmas celebrations will be.

I was talking to my friend about how she is coping in isolation and she said "I've been releasing hopes and expectations left and right!" Yep, I know how she feels.

So let's talk about Advent, not in the counting down to Christmas Eve with a chocolate calendar sense but in the theological sense.

Advent is all about hopes and expectations. It is literally about HOLY LONGINGS (all caps). It is about expecting things, the big things in our world, to be different: We long for God's realm of justice and compassion, for an end to suffering, corruption, disease, and so on. Advent is a holy longing for all the things that are promised in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Well, if cultural advent is needing some adjustments, real Advent has changed for me a bit too in 2020. And all the growing frustrations with this uncertain season made me feel like yelling Isaiah's words as my prayer to God: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! Make your name known! You've been faithful in the past, can you just please show up NOW! And make things right? We'll repent, we'll be faithful again, we'll do whatever it takes. We are willing to be shaped into your people." (That's my paraphrase of Isaiah)

This passage in Isaiah is part of a longer lament, a song of sorrow and a cry to God. My bible commentary says that laments often come about in times of collective disorientation. Anyone feeling collective disorientation lately? Yeah, me too.

Laments in the Bible follow a certain pattern. They usually lay out an ugly reality, then remind God (that is to say, the author reminds themselves) about God's faithfulness in the past and God's ongoing faithful character, and they include promises to do better.

I don't think I need to lay out our 2020 ugly realities in great detail for anyone here. We've got the disease that shall not be named and all its terrible fall out; we've got our poor dear beautiful planet suffering from humanity's collective greed, and we've got all of us still trapped in a work-work-work-consume-consume-consume hamster wheel that makes profits soar and economic injustice grow. It is all like filthy cloth or shrivelled leaves, as Isaiah would say. What is is going to take to change?

Yet we also rely on this same God that Isaiah is calling upon. That's wonderful, I believe it with all my heart; even if it's been quite a while since the Red Sea was parted and since we've attributed earthquakes to divine intervention.

One author I read asks<sup>1</sup> “If in biblical times God intervened in history with “awesome deeds” why does God not do so today? Surely there are egregious wrongs that deserve to be righted....We want mountains to quake and the nations to tremble at God's presence. Instead the sufferings of our day are too often met with divine silence.” Sometimes it does feel like God is “hidden,” like Isaiah says.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a concentration camp, saw this feeling of God's absence as precisely where we connect with God's true character; God not as some superhero waiting to intervene with magnificent force, but we see God's “determination to relate to the world through the vulnerable path of non-coercive love and suffering service rather than through domination...”

This is how we've come to know God through Jesus's life and death and resurrection. God's character is surprising, unexpected and even more powerful than death itself. This is what we've learned about God from Jesus. In our Advent journey we keep longing for this God, Emmanuel, God with us.

Every time we come face to face with love and service, and grace we are witnessing God's presence in the world.

Now I should point out that even Isaiah doesn't *really* think that God is hidden. After his outburst, Isaiah conjures up an image of God's character as a Father: which would have meant in those days a provider, protector, clan-gatherer. Isaiah also conjures up an image of God as a potter, a force gently, steadily molding and shaping God's people. In our Advent journey we keep longing for this powerful and tender God to shape us.

I tried a pottery wheel once. It did not go well, it was very hard. The clay needs to be very centered so that the potter's wheel and hands can be effective. And so for Advent let's work on that, in whatever ways we can. Let's keep ourselves open to God's shaping influence at this uncertain time.

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<sup>1</sup> Scot Bader-Saye, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B volume 4)

Remember when we were talking about holy longings around Christmas this year? Well I have some suggestions.

One thing you could try is to start with a blank slate. Do your best to release all your expectations, grieve over them if you have to, rationalize, cry, whatever it takes. Then slowly start adding back the things that are possible, the essentials: maybe it's a tree, a zoom gathering rather than an in-person gathering, 2 kinds of cookies instead of 5, maybe a special meal of smaller proportions than a turkey, a walk out in the cold with a mask to keep you warm, a solo rendition of Silent Night.

One idea I saw yesterday was to create a reverse Advent calendar box, where you set aside one food item each day of Advent and then have a full box to donate to a food bank by Christmas Eve.

Advent might also invite us to try an intentional spiritual practice:

- perhaps for the next 25 days be purposeful in reading your Bible
- Spend 20 minutes in meditative silence each day in Advent
- Make a note of the acts of love or hope that you witness
- Find service project or a special place to donate your time or money this season
- Sing a carol every day — all your favourites!

And most important, lay aside the expectations of the heavens opening up and the mountains quaking and a miraculous cure putting everything back where it used to be. We've already been quaked, people, let's take it from here.

Bring your awareness to the HOLY LONGINGS the essentials, the core of what we hope for this Advent: That God, our father, the shaper of the church, is faithful. That the Christ centered at Christmas walks with us, and is bringing about the Shalom we hope for. Do not lose heart as we begin our Advent journey.