

In strictly liturgical churches Christmas carols are not sung until Christmas Eve. There are separate sections in our own hymnal for Advent songs and Christmas carols. Strictly speaking the church is supposed to sing, “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” or “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming,” and *not* to sing “Silent Night” or “Away in a Manger” until Christmas Eve when the liturgical calendar recognizes that Jesus is actually born. Then we sing traditional Christmas carols for two Sundays after Christmas. But it seems that the liturgical churches have mostly lost this battle because Christmas is celebrated earlier and earlier.

Yet there is a certain value in the emphasis upon preparation found in liturgical churches. That is what Advent is all about. One church stumbled into a liturgical Advent because they simply couldn’t find all the pieces to the nativity scene. So the first Sunday there was only a bare manger. The next Sunday the shepherds and animals appeared. Until finally the Christ child was placed in the manger on Christmas Eve.

Our passage today from Isaiah has something of that flavor. Isaiah is no longer a young man as he was in chapter six when he had a magnificent vision in the temple. Now he is an old man who has returned with his people from exile. They returned to a city in ruin, a temple in ruin, and lives in ruin. These were dark days for the people of Israel, many would say darker than 2020 has been.

And it had been a long time since anyone had seen God do mighty works. So, Isaiah pours out this lament, asking God to “*rend (i.e. tear) the heavens*” once again. He pleads for God to act. Standing in the rubble of a lost temple, amid the ruins of a lost faith, he cries out for God to be visible instead of hidden. In verse seven, the prophet proclaims, “*for you have hidden your face from us.*” Earlier in verse five, he tries to blame the people’s sin on God, “*When we continued to sin against them (i.e. those who do right), you were **angry.***”

This bleak passage from Isaiah is actually perfect for the beginning of Advent because it is so filled with eagerness and a yearning for God to act. This yearning would not be realized until the birth of Jesus Christ centuries later, but it's a good model for us as we prepare for Christmas in 2020. We need to reflect on the deep need we have for Christ. It would be a mistake to gloss over the very *reason* for Christ's coming. He came into the world because the world was lost in sin. The coming of Christ filled a deep need in people, then and now. Can you identify with Isaiah's words about the hidden-ness of God? I suspect that most of us can. Have you ever stood amid the ruins of your faith and prayed, but felt like you were only talking to yourself? Have you ever stood beside the bed of someone in pain and prayed for God's help, but felt that God was far away? Have you ever felt that God had remained hidden for too long? Have you ever wanted God to do something, something like "tear the heavens and come down?" All of us have felt that way at one time or another.

Perhaps those are the people who are struggling the most to get ready for Christmas. How can you properly enjoy Christmas when you feel that God is absent? How can you experience the presence of God when all you have experienced is the hidden-ness of God?

Many famous people have experienced the hiddenness of God. The famous theologian Henri Nouwen felt that way. In fact, he coined a phrase, "the ministry of absence," to describe God's actions among us. He insisted that we should prepare people for God's absence as well as for his presence. The worship service itself, says Nouwen, expresses the fact of God's absence:

"We eat bread, but not enough to take our hunger away; we drink wine, but not enough to take our thirst away; we read from a book, but not enough to take our ignorance away. Around these "poor signs" we come together and celebrate. What then do we celebrate? The simple signs, which cannot satisfy all our desires, speak first of Gods' absence. He has not yet returned; we are still on the road, still waiting, still hoping, still expecting, still longing...The minister is not called to cheer people up but modestly to remind them that in

the midst of pains and tribulations the first sign of the new life can be found and a joy can be experienced which is hidden in the midst of sadness” (*Reaching for the Invisible God*, Philip Yancey, p. 241-242).

Philip Yancey confessed to such an experience. In his book *Reaching for the Invisible God*, he writes: “I experienced the sense of abandonment just as I was making progress spiritually, advancing beyond childish faith to the point where I felt I could help others. Suddenly, the darkness descended. For an entire year, my prayers seemed to go nowhere; I had no confidence that God was listening. No one had prepared me with *the ministry of absence*.” At another point in the book, he writes, “God’s style often baffles me: he moves at a slow pace, prefers rebels and prodigals, restrains his power, and speaks in whispers and silence. Yet even in these qualities I see evidence of his longsuffering, mercy, and desire to woo rather than compel.”

The famous poet Emily Dickinson had a profound faith, but she too experienced God as hidden. She wrote: *I know that He exists/ Somewhere in Silence/ He has hid his rare life/ From our gross eyes.*

In Deuteronomy, Moses recounts the amazing, miraculous actions of God in dealing with the people of Israel that are recorded in Exodus. God shook the mountains when he spoke. God marched them through the Red Sea, then destroyed the pursuing Egyptian armies. God gave them a fire by night and a cloud by day. God provided miraculous water and bread. Moses says, “*For what great nation is there, that has a god so near to them, as Yahweh our God is whenever we call on him?*” (Deuteronomy 4:7) How can God be so angry now, we might ask?

Those were times when God “tore open the heavens and came down,” but Deuteronomy shows Moses fearful that the people will not obey in spite of all that God had done. And indeed, his foreboding was exactly right. When God was spectacularly visible and active with many miracles, history shows that such actions did NOT produce faith. In fact, their faith was weak in the

presence of God. Consider Job. Job's faith was strong in the absence of God. Dare we suggest that the absence of God produces more faith than the presence of God? I suspect that if we look carefully at human history we just might find that to be true!

Isaiah pleads in verse 9: *"Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people."* Living under God's anger over our sins may be the right way of recognizing hope and joy when they do appear. There are many people this time of year who really struggle to get themselves in the Christmas spirit. These folks are struggling with the dark side of life and have trouble making themselves feel cheery at Christmas. But Isaiah would say that those are the very people who are most prepared for Christmas. We are ready for the light only when we have sat in the darkness. We are ready for the presence of God only when we have experienced the absence of God. We are ready for the joy of Christ's coming when we have felt the anger of God.

The hidden-ness of God is not an empty void, not since Jesus came and showed us what God is really like. I love that verse from Colossians 1:15 that says that, *"The son is the image of the invisible God..."* Jesus put a shape to God's absence. Jesus offers a face to the angry, hidden God. Our Scripture today shows us how Israel yearned for God to be made known. And that yearning was gloriously answered in Jesus. And our yearning is still answered in him. When we stop and look, we can see the light of God in him. When we stop and listen, we can hear the voice of God in him. And his voice is encouraging and inviting, not angry and condemning.

So maybe that's why the church has the season of Advent in the weeks before Christmas. If we are to see the fragile light which dawns among us in Christ, we must sit for a while in the darkness. If we are to know the presence of God, we must first experience the absence of God. If we are to joyfully celebrate the Savior's birth, we must first recognize God's anger, as Isaiah did. Amen.

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