

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the beginning of a new church year. Last Sunday, we celebrated the end of the last church year with a feast day. And while there are beautiful new things in our worship space, this is *not* a feast day nor do we celebrate our new year with countdowns, champagne or fireworks. No, we begin this new season with a lament—a lament from the heart of the prophet Isaiah on behalf of people in a world not as it should be. Not as it was promised to be. Isaiah cries out to God: “O that you would tear open the heavens and *come down*, so that the mountains would quake at your presence, as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence.”

Isaiah cries out to God on behalf of the Jewish people who have returned to their homes *after* the exile in Babylon. This lament comes from the time of restoration—a time when the people thought *surely* God’s favor would lead to increase and prosperity. God had brought them out of exile again and returned them to their rightful heritage, and yet the first temple lay in ruins and many of the people had rebelled. The people’s confidence in God had all but evaporated. In short, Isaiah cried out, “Where are you, God?”

Like aid-workers, doctors, nurses or journalists whose co-workers have been murdered pray in lament today: “Where are you, God?” Like yet another mother of color cries out over a son shot and killed: “Where are you, God?” Like too many families of gay, lesbian or transgendered children abused, beaten or murdered because of their sexual orientation: “Where are you, God?” Like some of you here in this congregation, carrying heavy burdens and asking, “Where are you, God?” With the onset of the annual orgy of acquisition that hypnotizes our families and friends and even ourselves, we may also find ourselves wondering, “Where are you, God?”

We begin our fresh start, our new year, in the midst of suffering and injustice much like Isaiah’s Jewish community. “O that you would tear open the

heavens and come down.” Come to us, we plead, come to us in love. Come to us and change us. Come to us because we can’t seem to stop making a hash of things on our own.

And yet...and yet...and yet. We lament instead of despairing because we *hope*. And we hope because we have reason to hope. We have reason, not simply to be passively optimistic, but to actively hope. To act, in other words, to act in loving kindness because, as Mark’s Jesus tells the disciples, the Son of Man *is* coming in clouds with great power and glory. But God is coming to a dark world—where the sun has been darkened and moon will not give its light, and even the stars have fallen from heaven.

When I was a little boy, my family and I went to the Lewis and Clark caverns not far from where my grandparents lived in Bozeman, Montana. We walked deep into the earth and stood in a room where all sense of scale disappeared. The space appeared to be about the size of this sanctuary, but in reality was well over 100 yards wide. We stood quietly until we could hear only the only sounds of water dripping and our own breath. Then the guide gave us an experience of total darkness by snapping off the lights for a few minutes. There was no distinction between having your eyes open and having them closed. At first, the experience was unsettling, but after a few minutes, the dark began to feel quite different. Different in a way that I was too young to describe.

Darkness can be profoundly upsetting, whether we are in the physical darkness of a cave, in the emotional darkness of grief, or the social darkness of self-obsession or ignorance. Perhaps especially upsetting is the metaphorical darkness of a world in pain, cold and angry—a world where we just want to howl in the dark to a God that we cannot see or feel or explain to those who suffer. But there’s another kind of darkness available to us in Advent. To find it, we must come before God in silence and stillness, putting aside our habitual defenses and disguises, releasing our grip on what usually makes us feel safe or good or right.

Many years after my experience of the darkness deep beneath the Rocky Mountains, I found a way to begin making sense of it. What finally gave voice to

the subtle shift in my perception was a phrase from T.S. Eliot's masterwork, *The Four Quartets*: "I said to my soul," Eliot wrote, "I said to my soul be still, and let the dark come upon you, which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre, the lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed with a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness."¹ Darkness and emptiness are not always fearful experiences. By seeking God in them, even in lament, darkness and emptiness can be transformative learning experiences in much the same way that the dark, empty hollow of a cello gives it voice.

Let me tell you a story: Nanin Roshi was a great Zen teacher who lived high on a mountaintop in Japan. His wisdom caught the attention of a professor of philosophy and religion who traveled for many days to see Nanin. When the professor finally reached the monastery, Nanin welcomed him in and, being a good host, prepared tea. The professor began to talk excitedly about his learning, his research and his many scholarly achievements. All the while, Nanin poured tea into the professor's cup. The professor talked on and on, until the tea reached the rim of the cup and then began to flow on to the table. The professor kept talking. Nanin kept pouring. Finally, the tea spilled over the table and on to the professor's trousers! The professor jumped up: "Clearly, master, the cup is too full! Nothing more can go in it!" "Just so," said Nanin, setting teapot down. "Like the cup, you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I teach you unless you offer me an empty cup?"

The lesson for us is this: Advent can be a time for emptying ourselves so that God can enhance and renew our perspectives on God, on the church and on the suffering world around us. To change us and the scene around us with a movement of darkness on darkness. The reality of God's love, according to Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, "the reality of God's love is so immeasurably greater than any mind or heart or imagination can take in, we must let go in order to make room."² God *is* coming to a world where it feels as though the sun has been darkened and moon will not give its light, and even the stars

¹ Eliot, T. S.. *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*. Orlando, Fl.: Harcourt, 1991.

² Williams, Rowan. *Tokens of Trust*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

have fallen from heaven. But the darkness of God in Advent is not the darkness of Good Friday and Holy Saturday—the darkness of the tomb. The darkness of God in Advent is the darkness of the womb—warm, tender, nurturing and life-giving.

We wait in the darkness of the womb in Advent, waiting to be rebirthed. Waiting with eager anticipation to be re-created. We wait, held in the mystery of love with the gentle, steady thrum of a mother's heartbeat in our ears until it is time for the darkness to once again yield to the light. The light that *has* come and *will come again* in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow and at dawn. In a sense, the light has always been here, timeless and vast. The light of Christ slips through the cracks to take root in our hearts until such time as God's heaven is fully realized. The light will come again at times known only to God.

You've surely noticed by now that we have changed the colors of the sanctuary for Advent: the alter is draped with deep blue, the candles are blue, and this chasuble and stole are adorned with deep blue. Our vestments also carry images of gold fleur-de-lis, a flower that Christians have associated with Mary, the mother of our incarnate Lord, for centuries. These are more than cosmetic changes. They are wordless invitations into the mysterious, dark womb of a Holy Advent—invitations to watch and wait, not knowing when the time will come that the holy one will be born in our midst again. Relax into this loving darkness with a sense of God's mystery, emptied but alert, as a way to participate in the holy birth that is coming in clouds with great power and glory.