

**St. Francis Church: The First Sunday of Advent - November 30, 2008**  
**The Rev. Richard M. Simpson**

The first words of this Advent season and a new liturgical year come from the prophet Isaiah, a desperate cry for help addressed to God: *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...* Have you ever prayed such a prayer or stood with someone who has? Perhaps it was at the grave of a loved one who died before their time. Or maybe you have gone through a rough divorce or lost your job right before the holidays.

One of the exercises I ask our confirmands to go through with their mentors is intended to expand their repertoire of Biblical metaphors for God. The Bible has far more metaphors than our liturgies tend to avail themselves of, and I want them to explore that a bit. One of the texts that I have them look up comes from the tenth chapter of the Book of Job, where Job suggests that God is a lion. (Job 10:16)

But Job isn't using that image in the flattering way that C.S. Lewis does with his great Christ-figure, Aslan. You will remember that Job is suffering from incredible loss and is in incredible emotional turmoil. But worse than all of his spiritual pain is that he has come to see God as the *cause* of all of his suffering. When he says that God is a lion, it's because he feels like a wildebeest that God has hunted down and chewed up and spit out. He is asking a haunting question: why are you doing this to me, God?

It's hard enough when your life is coming unglued. But you can pretty much get through anything if you feel that God is with you, if you feel that God is your rock or the good shepherd who walks with you through the valley of the shadow of death. Even if we know it will be another six months or a year that we have to face chemotherapy or until we find new employment or love again, we can make it if we have hope. We can make it if we feel that God is on our side and working through it all to bring about something good.

Our deepest fear comes when we are no longer certain that God *is* with us. But if you believe God has abandoned you, or worse still that God is the *source* of your pain (a lion who has hunted you down) it is too much to bear. Like Isaiah, Job prays for God to tear open the heavens and come down. He is a desperate man who wants his day in court; he wants to be heard. (Actually, what he wants is to make his case against God.) If only God would tear open the heavens and show His face...

For Isaiah, it isn't personal suffering like Job's but a national tragedy that gives us these first words of Advent. He speaks on behalf of an entire nation, out of the pain of the Babylonian exile and a feeling of being betrayed by God. Isaiah poses a profound theological question, perhaps the most serious theological question any of us will ever ask. Given God's past marvelous deeds, where is God now? If God could do all those wonderful things "back in the day" (like bring the slaves out of Egypt and defeat Pharaoh) then why isn't God doing something about the Babylonians and King Nebuchadnezzar *now*? It is in line with Isaiah's words that we ask why God didn't intervene to stop six million Jews from being killed in the middle part of the twentieth century or stop those plans from crashing into the towers in lower Manhattan. *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...*

It may seem like an odd way to begin Advent—like a strange way to begin our preparations for Christmas. We come here, after all, in a month when it is all too easy to feel off-kilter and our hope is to leave here feeling a little more grounded and centered than when we came in. One of our

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parishioners here reminds me from time to time that the world can be pretty tough, and he comes here to hear good news preached. I sympathize completely and for what it's worth, sometimes my week is no picnic either. But my experience as a pastor and preacher (and above all as a fellow traveler) is that sometimes the good news isn't immediate. And if you are in a place where you can identify with where Isaiah or Job are and find yourself yelling at the heavens, then a pastor who says, "there, there" is not much of a pastor. The theologians call it "cheap grace."

This prayer expresses extraordinary grief and loss and a sense of betrayal that grow out of Isaiah's first-hand experience and he needs to take that to God, whom he feels has been M.I.A. He needs to be heard and acknowledged before he can get to hope. So the question before us on this first week in Advent is simply this: what do we do with that?

I read one commentator this week who said that "*God hides in order to deconstruct a distorted faith.*" Now that sounds like the kind of thing a theologian *would* say, doesn't it? But I want to ask you to hang in there with that statement for a few minutes because I think it evokes good theology. *God hides in order to deconstruct a distorted faith.*

God is beyond all of our language, beyond all of our images. I don't mean only the false idols. Of course God is not a golden calf or a little statue or a 401-K. But I also mean that God is beyond even the most helpful of icons: beyond "father" and "rock" and "light" and "lion." At the burning bush when Moses wants to know God's name, God insists, "I am who I am." At best *all* of our words and images for God—even our very favorites—can only point us toward the Inscrutable One who is beyond our understanding and comprehension—the One Tillich called "the God beyond God." We need human words. But we must always be careful about confusing our words for God with God; they are not the same. God is always bigger.

So when someone tells me that they don't believe in God (which tends to happen for the first but not last time for almost all kids right around confirmation age) I never panic. I just ask them to tell me about this god they no longer believe in. And usually if they are willing to humor me and talk about it, what I discover is that they are actually beginning to deconstruct a distorted faith. Or to say it another way, I don't believe in the god they don't believe in either! They need to let go of an old image that is keeping them from encountering the more mysterious but living and real God. Their crisis of faith is real; don't misunderstand me. But every crisis represents not only danger but an opportunity and in this kind of experience there is a very real opportunity to discover God anew. And I think that is why these words of Isaiah may be a very good place to start our Advent journey.

Let me be specific. We talk of "father God" so much we may actually begin to think that God is an old man with a gray beard sitting up in space. We go along, often unquestioning, because as long as life is good it's just fine for God to be "the big guy up there"—not all that different from Santa Clause or a kindly old grandfather. Until one day chaos breaks in and we find ourselves really hurting. Sometimes it takes an exile, or a crisis in faith, or a recession to bring us to our knees: we find ourselves vulnerable and frightened and we cry out for God to make it all better: to put a band-aid on our boo-boo or to fix the ozone layer or clean up the oceans or zap away weapons of mass destruction and bring about peace on earth: "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...*"

And when nothing happens, we start to convince ourselves that we are atheists; since God clearly hasn't done what we asked. We stand with Isaiah and Job at a crossroads in that moment however,

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and what in fact needs to go is not our faith but those old images we've been carrying around that are now keeping us from encountering the true and living God. *That can be very hard work.* And most of us don't like that place of unknowing, that place of painful uncertainty and anxiety. We just want God to fix it all.

If we are willing to work though all of that, however, we may find ourselves giving birth to something new. Here is the thing though: the process of giving birth is always painful, isn't it? (Or so I am told anyway!) If it is about nothing else this season is about birth—certainly the child whose birth we are preparing to celebrate but also the new birth that each of us must go through to discover authentic faith. We prepare ourselves for a king of kings and a lord of lords, a messiah who would rule the world. And what we get is a tiny little baby who needs his diaper changed. We find ourselves kneeling before a manger and a child who needs to be fed and cared for and loved.

What if, as my scholarly friend says, such moments represent an opportunity rather than an obstacle to faith—a chance to *deconstruct* a distorted faith in order to become free to *reconstruct* a more Incarnational faith? So that God can meet us where we are. Or more accurately, what if Christmas invites us to stop looking up to the heavens for a magical God who fixes things and to open our eyes to see God-with-us redeeming and healing things? A God who says, "I'm right here, now ... wherever and whenever two or three gather together."

The irony of this prayer is that it has been answered: the heavens have been torn asunder and God has come down to dwell among us, very God of very God, begotten not made. The Word that was with God and was God has become flesh to dwell among us and we have beheld his glory, full of grace and truth.

*But not as we expected.* The God we get comes to us as a little child who grows up and dies on a cross. Easter life emerges only out of risk and loss and death. Christ's initial appearance will lead to new and more profound questions before it offers us easy answers, questions like the ones Brian Wren raises in the hymn that we'll ponder together over the four weeks of this Advent season:

Can this newborn mystery, an infant learning to feed,  
defeat the grim and chilling powers of domination, death and sin?

Can he? Is this little baby the best God can do? This One with the tiny little hands and fingers—He is going to defeat the powers of domination, death, and sin?

Wren's poem is (as the Church has come to expect of him) very good theology. But let me give away the ending: the answer is yes. The mystery of this newborn child, this infant learning to feed, is that he is the Way and the Truth and the Life, and that he is victorious over the chilling powers of domination, death, and sin. No matter how bad this week was for any of us, that is good news. Christ before us, Christ behind us, Christ beside us, Christ beneath us, Christ above us. Christ here and now, among us. Don't look for the skies to be opened up—just look around you.