

Advent 1: Sunday, November 27, 2011

Awesome Deeds We Do Not Expect: Learning to Pay Attention

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

As we enter into the Sundays of Advent we are being invited to open ourselves to the Living Presence of God – to see that through the Story of Scripture that shapes us – God has been with us,
– to see that through our living encounters with God’s Spirit that God is with us,
– and to see by engaging the Story and Vision of God in Scripture that God will be with us.

Our theme: *Awesome Deeds We Do Not Expect* calls us to notice God in places or ways we might not expect – in the small things, in the midst of the difficult things, even in the midst of the bad things.

God enters our world in many ways – some large and dramatic, others small and subtle.

Isaiah’s imagery about mountains falling down, valleys standing up, and unlikely people appearing on the road is not so much about a dramatic moment as it is about **a decisive change**.

God’s presence is disruptive and surprising, never safe or predictable.
Nothing pictures the surprising nature of God’s presence than God’s coming in the person of Jesus.

What we celebrate and anticipate this Advent is the unexpected manner of God’s coming in Jesus, and the unexpected ways God is still coming.

Let us be open!

The theme for this first Sunday of Advent is: *Learning to Pay Attention*.

We struggle at times with wondering where God is
– but the message of hope, the message of the Gospel is that God is near
– so keep awake, pay attention.

Our Advent story begins with the people of God crying out – Where are you Lord? “why is this happening to us?”

In Isaiah 64, the people of God cry out “if only you would rend the heavens and come down.”

They sense nothing of God’s work and presence in the current context.

They think only of spectacular supernatural happenings as signs of God’s presence – like the Passover and the Exodus.

Such spectacular signs can deal with all the mountains in our lives
– all that is imposing, oppressive, bad with the world; spectacular signs that would make the mountains quake.

And so, the people of God ask for some intervention where God would come down like fire, so that the enemies of God’s people, the evil ones in the world, might come to know God’s name
– that God’s presence would make the enemies tremble.

The psalmist as well as the prophet, expresses a similar cry: “How long, Lord God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?” in essence crying out – “How long Lord will you be absent from us?”

Are we not still asking this question today?

- as people struggling to understand the ways of God in a world that has little space for God,
- as the people of God trying to make sense of what is going on around us
- especially when what is going on seems so bad
- we ask: “where are you Lord?”

A couple of weeks ago the Sunday evening small group at the Longeneckers was trying to make sense of the death of Jim Miller, where Jim Miller was brutally murdered and his wife seriously injured by someone, who is still at large, invaded their home.

We find ourselves asking the question: Where are you God, when bad things happen to good people? We have a hard time seeing you in the midst of this.

There are numerous inadequate answers, crude answers to this question. Crude, because we see God in crude, limited ways

- all you have to do is search the internet and you will find numerous responses to “why bad things happen to good people”:
 - (1) we are broken people, and so we bring it upon ourselves,
 - (2) God allowed this, so there must be some purpose of God in this,
 - (3) “why do bad things happen to good people” is the wrong question
 - in all of us being sinners, not one of us is good – so the right question is, “why do good things happen to bad people?”
 - (4) God loves us and cares for us, but God must not be powerful enough to deal with evil in the world = evil wins.

No matter how we try to rationalize why bad things happen to us, it seems that there are no good answers – just inadequate ones and we are still left wondering – “where are you Lord?”

But when crude answers will not do, we come to recognize that “where are you Lord?” is a crude question – it does not carry the insight, the vocabulary necessary for understanding how God is present in the midst of every situation.

And so we go back to Isaiah 64 – there is no need for a new revelation – there is a merely a need to be reminded of the ever present presence of God.

We find our voice as we add our voice to these voices:

- “For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways.”

But then in that recognition, the language changes to confession in the context of crying out, “where are you Lord?”

“But when we continued to sin against them [the ones who you come to help who gladly do right], you were angry.

How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like soiled underclothes; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you for you have hidden your face from us and given us over to our sins.”

And then out of confession, there comes a renewed awareness of who we are in light of God’s presence.

“Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are like clay, you the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord; do not remember our sins forever. O look on us, we pray, for we are your people” (v. 9).

Or as the Psalmist expresses in the midst of remembering: “Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved” (v. 7).

In the midst of all the bad that encroaches upon our lives – choosing to confess – we are the work of your hands – you are the potter, we are the clay (cf. Jeremiah 18) is a place of learning to ask less crude questions about God’s presence with us.

On that Sunday evening we talked about lament as a response to dealing with the pain of bad things in our lives

- a process of being angry with God, angry at God,
- which then leads us to seeing that God has been with us in our past and is indeed now with us in the midst of our present pain,
- to finding a way of living with hope relying upon God in the midst of our human brokenness, in the midst of our broken world.

Carrie shared how Jim Miller’s widow at his memorial service shared of God’s comfort and grace, of God’s peace, of God’s presence.

How is she able to respond in such a way? She does not seem to be asking, at least publically, “where are you Lord?”

She gives witness to God being near her, with her, comforting and strengthening her in the midst of the tragic loss of her husband.

I do not know if we can ever come up with a rational answer to the problem of evil or the question of why bad things happen to us – that will truly put us at ease.

Theologians and philosophers have tried and are trying.

Our rationalizations may offer some comfort, but I find that they are often temporary – when a new situation arises we experience the same sense of God being distant.

What instead we need is that no matter what happens in our lives, no matter what we experience – we are a people, who like Abraham, come to believe God, trust God, rely upon God, live in relationship with God in all of life.

It is in turning to God's Story, that we are transformed to ask a different kind of question.

God's Story shapes our story in the midst of our encountering bad things and our sense of God being absent – we begin to see God differently in the darkness.

As I turn to Scripture I see the people of God turning to God – which is what lament does as well – turning to God in spite of the sense that God is absent. How does this make any sense?

Maybe all the inadequate answers have some modicum of truth – we live in a world that is alienated from God, we are alienated from God, we are overly preoccupied with ourselves, even when we wish and desire the good, we often act in ways which are contrary – so what do we do?

Yes, we ask very personally
“where are you God?”

Are we willing to ask this question in the way the Hebrews asked this question
– reminding God that we are God's while reminding ourselves of who we are in relation to God?

I think we often ask the question of “where are you God” from a posture that sets us apart from God.

A few years back Hilary got into some trouble – she never asked Lynne and me, “where were you to keep me from this trouble?” but she did ask “why are you not yelling at me dad?”

My response was: “Would yelling help? I yell at you over the stupid things – leaving on the lights, forgetting to do something – but what you find yourself in now requires us to walk together for you to get through this.”

Walking with Hilary was not just about doing something, fixing something, but it meant being present to her, journeying with her, being in an ongoing relationship with her – a relationship that amazingly grew deeper as we navigated this “trouble” together.

The cry for God's intervention, the message of the Gospel, is all about God being present with us, about God being in relationship with us;

Not merely one who fixes things in our lives, but one who enters into our lives and walks with us.

The hope and grace that is in such an understanding is that **we are not alone – no matter how difficult life becomes.**

Perhaps, then in light of God walking with us, the question for us is not, “where are you God,” but “Lord, show yourself to us as we walk together with you in this?”

God's coming in Jesus is all about being with us, being in relationship with us

In reflecting on this, I think that we can ask the question “where are you Lord?” in two ways.

One from a skeptical posture – where we are ask, perhaps somewhat impersonally, “where is God?”

This kind of questioner has a difficult time seeing God at all, even when God reveals himself, because they set the parameters for how God can be seen. They want answers without relationship.

My nephew is asking this question in this way – and it does not take much for him to be unconvinced to believe that God is in no way concerned about him, God in no way cares for him – God is not making his life work out the way he wants it to be.

The other posture is one of being a people rooted in the Story of God, people who have come to know God, people who seek to be open to God in their relationship with God.

They recognize that God is there, but wonder about whether God is present.

“If you really are God, why did you allow this? Where the hell are you?”

Yet, they become aware that the barrier to seeing God is more within them, than it is of God being not visible.

This is demonstrated by Tevye in the Fiddler on the Roof.

Tevye would often have conversations with God and he would admit that he had a difficult time seeing the presence and plan of God

– for example, in the midst of his poverty, we hear Tevye declaring to God, “could you not go and bless another people for a while.”

This kind of questioner, is one who knows God, yet realizes the difficulty in seeing God lies in them, and rather than asking “where is God?” they find themselves asking in the midst of difficult times “Lord, help me see you.”

This is the good news of our Gospel focus.

Do we see the signs of God’s coming, God’s presence?

Keep watch, keep on the look out for God – the promise is “we will see God.”

Seeing God is what Jesus’ coming in our humanity is all about.

John expresses that Jesus has made known to us the fullness of God, in the midst of our brokenness as human beings – “no one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18).

So, when bad things happen to us and we ask, “where are you Lord?” may we also be about expressing, “Lord, show me where you are, show me your presence”

– “because I cannot understand what is going on

– I need you to walk with me in this – I cannot handle this in my life unless you walk with me in this.”

May we be open to the grace in each circumstance,

- the grace of seeing Jesus,
- of seeing God,
- no matter how bad the circumstance we are in.

May the salutation Paul writes to the Corinthians be a word that gives us strength in difficult times, in our waiting on God times, in wondering where God is times:

“I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way – with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge – God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.

He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (1 Cor. 1: 4-9).

The Saturday morning Scripture Engagement Group has raised some helpful questions and comments for us at NSMC to be more open to seeing God’s presence:

Where have we seen God show up in our story?

We tell these stories but inadequately. We need to practice, to develop our story telling skills – so that we can discover how to acknowledge God’s presence in all of our life.

May our asking “where are you Lord,” become more a question of our asking to see God – “Lord, help us to pay attention to your presence, help us to see your presence in all that we encounter.” Lord, help us see you!