

Advent One – Sunday, November 30, 2014

O That You Would Reveal Your Hope

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

As we enter into Advent, our text echoes our voices in crying out to God that all is not right with the world.

We cry out, “How long, O, Lord” as we wait.

And as the psalmist and the prophets we pray, plead for God to intervene, to break through the suffering and pain in the world, and perhaps even more specifically, the suffering and pain in our own lives, in order to have things set right.

But what if we think that we have done all that we can to try and be right, to try to do what is right and God does not seem to intervene, to make it all right.

How long are we to wait? In the presence of Ferguson, MO, Iraq, Afghanistan, hunger, poverty, homelessness?

Then, the mystery is not just about our world, the mystery is about God
– as we come to realize that God does not act in the ways we wish or want God to act.

This was Job’s encounter as well.

The calamity that took place in his life.

The question that arises for us as we encounter Job is not so much about suffering, as undeserved suffering.

When we were younger we got punished for wrongdoing
– a certain sense of justice.

When we got older, as Eugene Peterson expresses, “one of the surprises . . . is that we come to see that there is no real correlation between the amount of wrong doing we commit and the amount of pain we experience” (*The Message*, Introduction to Job, 839).

Peterson further expresses, “An even greater surprise is that very often there is something quite the opposite: We do right and get knocked down. We do the best we are capable of doing, and just as we are reaching out to receive our reward we are hit from the blind side and sent reeling” (*Message*, 839).

When we encounter such suffering in the world, and even more personally, in our own lives
– this is the kind of suffering that “bewilders and outrages us.”

It bewildered and outraged Job and Job takes his protests to God.

Job's friends tried to find fault in Job somehow;

Job's wife told him to "curse God and die"

– which he did not do.

Job also did not explain suffering

– in fact he came to regard suffering as a mystery.

And as Peterson iterates, "in the course of [Job's] facing, questioning, and respecting suffering,

Job finds himself in an even larger mystery

– the mystery of God.

Perhaps the greatest mystery in suffering is how it can bring a person into the presence of God in a state of worship, full of wonder, love and praise.

Suffering does not inevitably do that, but it does it far more often than we would expect. It certainly did that for Job" (*Message*, 840).

We see down the road in Job's life his renewed response to God

– through the suffering, through the bewilderment, through the outrage, through the unknowing, through the mystery

– that Job came to encounter God in a new way.

And after Job is quiet long enough to hear from God

– and God says his piece (cf. Job 38-41)

– Job responds:

"I'm convinced: You can do anything and everything. Nothing and no one can upset your plans. You asked, 'Who is this muddying the water, ignorantly confusing the issue, second-guessing my purposes?' I admit it. I was the one. I babbled on about things far beyond me, made small talk about wonders way over my head. You told me, 'Listen, and let me do the talking. Let me ask the questions. You give the answers.'

I admit I once lived by rumors of you; now I have it all firsthand – from my own eyes and ears!"

Or – as the TNIV expresses it:

"My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you."

And so our prayer as we begin Advent, as we wait, amidst our bewilderment and outrage, even

with God, in the face of suffering and our suffering, as we gather on another Sunday

– we come before God asking, praying: "O, Lord, that you would reveal your hope."

O Lord, that we may no longer just hear of you, O Lord, that we might come to see you with our own eyes!

Our cry is not just for hope
– but for hope somehow to be embodied in One we can touch, feel, hear, see, experience
– for hope to be tangible, real, not just some figment or mere abstraction.

I have discovered that reality in God.

I learned to sing this song of Job's as an expression of my own coming to discover God when things remained unexplainable in my life
– actually a song taught to us by a YWAMer (the organization with whom Heather now serves in Australia and Southeast Asia)

“I have heard of thee, by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eyes seeth thee, now mine eyes seeth thee, now my eyes seeth thee, O Lord.”

Where does the reality of such hope come from?

What differentiates us as Anabaptists, from other followers of Christ, is that we live out our Christian lives in light of the end
– what God's purpose will accomplish.

We say we live our lives in light of the future that God is bringing about.

We live believing that God's future is inbreaking in the present and we live giving witness to that reality
– God's future in the present.

For example, what sets apart Anabaptist theologies in relation to other theologies
– like that of Thomas Finger and James McClendon
– is that that they begin with eschatology, or end things
– what God purposes to bring about through re-creating the world.

That is true of us as well.

If we only hoped for things to work out in the end
– we might live discouraged lives.

But, as we walk with God, with Christ, open to God's Spirit, we are given the ability to live in hope, with hope, trusting God to bring about God's future.

What God is bringing about, is actually breaking into the present through the people of God who are called to be sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's present and coming reign.

And this mystery of hope and future breaking into our present
– leads us to live in a certain way, a different way
– as expressed to us in Jesus' prophetic words in Mark 13:32ff: “Be on guard, be alert!” “Keep watch.” “Do not let the master find you sleeping.” “Watch.”

We live with an alertness that comes by being on the lookout for signs of where God's presence is enacting re-creation.

We live our lives always open to see signs in the present of the inbreaking of God's future, God's hope around us.

We live not just mindful of God

- as we walk humbly with God
- but we live mindful of the hope of God
- alert, watchful, watching for the hope of God
- of God doing what God alone can do
- even when we wonder in our present where this reality is as we encounter suffering.

We may never come up with a rational understanding or purpose for suffering

- that is part of the brokenness of our human condition
- arguments of what is fair or not do not seem to apply.

But in the midst of it, how we see God, how we reach out to God, how we hope in God

- we live, perhaps defiantly, perhaps resolutely, in God's presence in the midst of the suffering that is all around and our personal experience as well.

How does this relate to looking forward to celebrating Christ's birth?

It focuses our attention on Hope.

It focuses us on the One who is the embodiment of God's reign, of God's future, of God's hope.

Jesus is the One who accomplished the in breaking of God's impossible hope

- even even though he was born and lived under the nose of the most powerful forces on earth.

And though, we too live in circumstances that may erode our ability to imagine how God can possibly accomplish what God has set out to do,

when we come to the place in our lives where we not only hear about God, but come to see God with our own eyes,

we learn to trust the Story and Vision of God that God is capable of bringing about what God promises.

Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, and with God that it is hard/difficult for us to believe this Story and Vision of God

- we may find the repentant words of Job helpful:

“I'm sorry – forgive me Lord for doubting you.

I'll never again live on crusts of hearsay, crumbs of rumor

- but open my eyes and ears to you.”

May this be our cry, our prayer, during Advent, as well as during the ordinary seasons of our lives is that:

“O, Lord, help us to see you, to hear you, Renew our hope!”

Just as the early Christians prayed, “Maranatha” – “Come Lord” so too we pray, “Lord, renew our hope.”

May we who are struggling to hope, have the courage to pray this Advent season
– “Lord, may we see you.

Lord, renew our hope in you,
renew our hope in your Story and Vision,
renew our hope that your Story is our story.

Lead us to live in the presence of the mysteries of what we do not understand
– relying upon you and the hope that is embodied through you.”

May we see you with our eyes . . .

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