

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper

Sunday, November 29, 2020

First of three in an Advent Sermon Series entitled:

“Come, O Christ, the Light”

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

“Where Are You, God?”



“Where are you, God?” can be asked in a spirit of playful curiosity.

“Where are you, God!” can be asked with anger. “Where. Are. You. God?” can be asked with impatience. And, “Where are you, God?” can be asked with profound anguish, sitting, as the Psalmist states, in a ‘bowl full of tears’ (Psalm 80:5).

Curiosity. Anger. Impatience. Anguish. Given the right context, all of these emotions are understandable, justified. It might seem on the surface that the question’s variants are somewhat disrespectful, or even irreverent and insulting to God. Yet, to ask the question “Where are you, God?” is, I believe, instead “a sign of spiritual health”.¹

¹ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, “First Sunday of Advent”, *Preaching God’s transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, year B*, eds. Ronald Allen, Dale Andrews and Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 3.

Think about it. First, that God is even addressed is an acknowledgement that God exists. Second, that God is even addressed demonstrates a belief that there is a relationship with God and that God is able and inclined to hear us. Third, the question ‘where?’ assumes there is an answer. That is, God is somewhere, or better yet, the question and answer assume God can be found. So, asking the question, no matter how you are asking it, is not at all sacrilegious. On the contrary, it is a bold articulation of faith.

The Psalmist this morning is essentially asking God, “Um, where are you, God?” As I stated previously, context is everything, and the Psalmist had a really good reason to be asking the question.



From about 740 to 720 BC, the Assyrian army brutally ravaged the northern kingdom of Israel.² It was savage. Those who were not murdered or starved to death were deported. The Assyrians created tablets that showed them torturing the Israelites to let the next city know what was coming. These

² Geoffrey Grogan, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 143.

tablets showed the Assyrians skinning their victims alive, blinding them, and impaling them on stakes. One Assyrian King left a whole series of these tablets behind, and the descriptions are positively terrifying. “I flayed many right through my land and draped their skins over the walls,” he boasts in one. “I burned their adolescent boys and girls...A pillar of heads I erected in front of the city”.³



The so-called ‘Ten Lost Tribes of Israel’ were essentially lost forever. So when lamenting that the people are being forced “to drink tears by the bowlful” (80:5), the Psalmist is not being at all melodramatic nor hyperbolic.



³ Mark Oliver, ListVerse, History, “10 Horrors of being Invaded by the Assyrian Army”, December 16, 2017. <https://listverse.com/2016/12/07/10-horrors-of-being-invaded-by-the-assyrian-army/>, accessed November 28, 2020.

From my perspective, only when you realize the degree to which the Psalmist is almost inconsolable can one realize the immense magnitude of hope present in the cries “Come, save us” (80:2), “make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved” (80:3), “Restore us” (80:7), “Return to us, God Almighty” (80:14), and “Revive us” (80:18). In the face of children being flayed alive, to pray “Restore us, Lord Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved” renders the question “God, where are you?” one of deep faith and *not* apostasy.



This week, I read Richard Lischer’s recent reflection in *The Christian Century*. Therein he wrote, “For preachers (that’s me!), the usual challenge of the season is to hold Christmas cheer at bay so as to allow Advent to retain its brooding character”. Lischer continued, “This year, I have a feeling that won’t be a problem”.⁴

⁴ Richard Lischer, “Advent Is a Season of Sighs, Especially This Year”, *The Christian Century*, November 24, 2020. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/reflection/advent-season-sighs-especially-year?fbclid=IwAR1drm513cnucOMxOMxOsiLs8D-Bp9ih5GjHZIX77DtFLSm2WDRkDjbnOUHE>, accessed November 28, 2020.



Our nation is being flayed alive. As I prepare this message, 266,000 people will have died of the corona virus in the United States. We were not and are not 'turning the corner'. That's a lie. A lie. Sadly, a colossal national failure of biblical proportions due to obvious political ineptitude has culpably permitted over a quarter million people to die - and the worst is still to come. There will be no vaccine for the public until well into the New Year and we will have a winter surge, superimposed on top of a Thanksgiving surge, on top of a Christmas surge.



As a nation, we have committed a national sin, if not against our health care workers, then on our grandparents and grandchildren. And like the Ten Lost

Tribes of Israel, we can never get back those who die before a vaccine is distributed next year.



This week my heart is with the Vose/Everett/and Grobe families as they, I am sure, have asked over the last two years since Michael's diagnosis of cancer "Where Are You, God?". I am sure Lisa, especially, asked this question in anguish, anger, and impatience. During this first Sunday in Advent we are still in darkness. We are indeed brooding. The light that is Jesus Christ, the 'Son of Man' as the Psalmist calls him, has yet to come (80:17).⁵



This morning we lit the candle of Hope. Hope is not needed when all is content. Hope is not needed when all is well. Hope is not needed when there is light. Hope is not needed when all has been revealed and achieved. Hope exists

⁵ Lawrence Toombs, "The Psalms" in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles Laymon (Nashville, Tennessee: Abington Press, 1989), 285

when it is not well; hope exists in the darkness; hope is needed when we are ignorant and it is not yet accomplished. Hope is needed when we are asking, “Where Are You, God?”

Yesterday, I watched Joy Everett who still grieves her grandson’s, Michael’s, death setting-up the nativity scene that you see here. Joy set-up our nativity scene with more than one tear in her eye. And she has for two years cried bowls. She asked me yesterday, “Should I put Jesus in the nativity scene?”



I replied, “Not yet, Joy. Let us wait. Not yet”. Through her tears and intentional preparation, Joy taught me that Advent is a heart-bending ache coupled with hope.

Friends, may you receive this revelation as well. May our church live this revelation. May our nation that asks “Where are you, God?” seek some consolation in this revelation.

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.