

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
First Advent
November 27, 2005
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The Hard Labor of Advent

Isaiah 64:1-12

Psalm 80

Mark 13:24-37

You may be the exception to the rule, but I don't know anyone who hasn't at some point felt a little like the prophet Isaiah seems to be feeling in the first reading today. The world is so messed up that he hardly knows where to begin to express his angst. He looks at his unfaithful people. They were so unfaithful that God decreed—as a punishment, the Bible says—that they should be defeated in war and carted off as booty to Babylon, where they sojourned for a generation, pining for home, hanging their harps out of reach on willow trees to avoid giving in to the demands of their captors to sing the songs of Zion.

They had been given every advantage—a covenant, a law, a bunch of prophets to keep 'em on the straight and narrow. You name it, God did it for them—saved them from oppression, established them in the promised land, forgave them who knows how many times for transgressions and idolatries and indifferences galore. God was even present to them with hope and consolation in the very exile God engineered to correct them. But they continued to mess up, mess up so badly in fact that, according to Isaiah, even their good works stink to high heaven like a bunch of filthy rags. The world is such a huge intractable mess wherever you look, and it dismays and infuriates us, and we want to figure it out, wrestle it to the ground, fix it, make everybody heel. But what we end up doing is pinning it on somebody. And so the prophet blames his people.

Isaiah is also miffed with God. Where *is* God, anyway? God, he

complains, used to do astounding, saving sorts of things as a matter of course, used to make water boil just by breathing on it and tinder burst into flames just by looking at it, used to knock heads together, made 'em roll, gave evildoers their just desserts. But lately, as Woody Allen once said, God is drastically underachieving—or at least God seems not to be interested in doing great deeds for *Isaiah*. And so the prophet whines a bit about this dearth of divine demonstrations, and begs God to get back to being that old pyrotechnical God, to be mighty and even violent on behalf of the good guys, to tear open the heavens and come noisily down (although these days God would not have to tear the heavens open to come down, but only slip quietly through the hole we have opened in the ozone).

But deep down Isaiah suspects that God won't bother. He suspects that God has just gotten fed up and turned away from us for good. And you know in your heart that given the sorry state of human affairs, it's probably what you'd do too, if you were God. I know that I would have given up long ago trying to make people obey, use their directional signals, stop hating each other, and the like. Isaiah wouldn't blame God for throwing in the towel, and yet he can't help it—the world is a mess, and so he makes it God's problem as well as his faithless people's problem. He says to the empty sky, "So, God, you got angry, and you left us to our own stupid devices, and that's why we sinned, because you weren't here and you weren't paying attention, and now everything is ruined, and everything is silence, *and no one even remembers your name.*" And under our breath, those of us who have ever felt this way whisper with him, "And it serves you right."

You may be the exception to the rule, but, as I said before, I don't know anyone who hasn't at least once in a lifetime felt a little like Isaiah. The world is so impossibly messed up that you don't know where to begin laying the blame, whom to be mad at. We could, I suppose, be angry with ourselves, but that would take all the fun out of it. In order for righteous indignation to feel really righteous, it's necessary to be angry with everybody and everything *but* yourself, to maintain a

certain distance, an illusion of innocence. And so we write off a substantial portion of the human race that does not include us. “They” are responsible—Jews, Blacks, gays, liberals, conservatives, women, men, reporters, multinationals, the military. For Anne Minton’s Aunt Helen, it was the Communists who were a ubiquitous menace, the root of all evil. They were (she believed) especially busy promoting health foods, which (she insisted) were part of a plot to make Americans weak so that the Reds could more easily take over the country. The only people you could really trust were ‘Cath-o-lics’. It was too bad about the butcher. She liked him a lot, but when she found out he was a non-Cath-o-lic, she seriously considered getting her pork chops elsewhere. The world is so messed up that in order to make some sense of it and feel better, we write each other out of the Book of Life, and we live as if God has indeed, like a washed-up Elvis, simply left the building, but unlike the King, is never coming back.

Now, I would never ask you to ‘fess up in public about who drives you to distraction and who it is that you blame for ruining the world, or your life, or your neighborhood, or your workplace, or the church, or your day. But if you’re honest, there’s bound to be *somebody*. I know there is for me. More than one. Ask my TV when I’m watching a news conference, or the walls of the parsonage when I’m reading the paper, or the cat as it bolts from the room when I go on a rant.

Sometimes when I talk about hospitality in this place that has made a commitment to becoming a culture of grace and welcome, I wonder if I convey too thin a notion of what is in fact being asked of us. To get a better idea of the substance of this virtue and practice, we may need to consider what happens to us spiritually when we decide that all’s not right with the world (which it truly is not); and when we decide why that is (which is a trickier proposition); and when we decide who’s responsible (which is a really, really tricky thing to wade into). For hospitality to root itself in more than a superficial way among us as Christians and among us as a congregation, we may need to begin acknowledging a painful secret—namely, that we indeed have ‘enemies lists’ that none of us wants to admit to having compiled over the years. That may sound impossible, harsh, an overstatement, but it may also be true.

For the practice of hospitality to change us, we need as much exposure as we can get to the candor of the sort we get in this First Sunday of Advent, this gloom and doom sort of Sunday. It invites us to a sincere and subjective encounter with texts that refuse to sugarcoat God's clear assessment of our self-defeating, self-deluding, dishonest, evasive and alienated human condition. Because in the end, hospitality is not just about recognizing any old stranger as your own flesh and blood; it is about recognizing and embracing the very stranger you want least to be anywhere near, the one you would exclude if you had the power, the one you would demonize if it were socially acceptable in your circle to do so. In the end, and at its most radical, hospitality it is about loving the enemy.

Most of the time our enemies are people, but it's also the case that at times God can also feel like an enemy to us, especially when everything is falling apart and we cry out, and in reply—well, there is none. All there is is a strange silence, the silence of inaction, an apparent refusal to fix things like a cosmic concierge. God can feel so absent that we ache for God the way we ache over a death; and we may even end up hating God when the divine silence and inaction are prolonged past the point of no return for a loved one, for ourselves, for an afflicted or neglected people, for a world at war.

How we embrace, welcome, and entertain this awful silence, how we love this enemy who refuses us easy comfort is the deepest spiritual challenge many of us will ever encounter. If we are to mature in grace and grasp the hard edge of gospel hospitality, it will eventually entail an act of inhospitality—we have to bid good riddance to the very idea of a God who could set things right at will, but won't; and we have to welcome instead into our hearts and daily lives a God whose ways are not our own, who is truly a Stranger, and whose gifts to us are not always what we hoped for, even when we hoped for the very things we think religion teaches us to desire.

This God is not to be found tearing open heaven and making water roil with violent energy. This God does not make a lot of noise, and goes largely unnoticed amid the world's noise, its constant trumpeting of violence and oppressive power. This God, who seems so absent is in fact ubiquitous, looking back at us from behind the eyes of the suffering and the poor. This God of Jesus, the one born as a stranger among strangers in the quiet of night, has never gone away, never abandoned us, and has never been silent. We were just desiring another, expecting another, listening for another, demanding another. We were just needing someone to do our dirty work, and to do it the way the it is daily carried out in grief and bloodshed in this suffering world. We were looking in the places where victory is accomplished by and for the strong and where things go smoothly for the powerful. I was never there, this God says, but I am always here, in the people you blame, my name included on the list of the ones the world excludes.

How we accommodate this mystery of the deepest sort of solidarity with earth and flesh and not settle for anything less—this is the hard labor of Advent. And it starts today. May God bless our open spirits as we begin.