

1st Advent

**Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19**

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

[Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.]

**O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?**

You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

[Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.]

**Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.**

[Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.]

### **Isaiah 64:1-9**

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for You. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.

But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

Yet, O LORD, you are our Source; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

### **1 Corinthians 1:3-9** (Benediction)

Grace to you and peace from God our Source and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to God always because of the grace of God that has been given us in Christ Jesus, for in every way we have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among us-- so that we are not lacking in any spiritual gift as we wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. God will also strengthen us to the end, so that we may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful. Amen.

Advent Litany—yes, we are having an Advent Litany with the readers being the families who have pre-recorded the litany and sent the file to Don F. and Dave W-T. The worship leader or presiding minister of the day can light the candle(s) as the family reads. In fact, all households viewing the live stream could be invited to have a peace lamp which they light in their home and an Advent wreath with candles that they also light. Here is the prologue on the website from which we are taking the reading

Advent means “coming.” It is a time of longing, watching, and praying for God’s healing, transformative presence to be ever more vibrantly present in the world. In this sense, Advent is a season in which we focus on that key phrase in the Lord’s Prayer, “thy kingdom come.” As Christians, the good news we strive to live by and declare is that love is stronger than hate, peace more enduring than war, hope more powerful than despair – and the light of God’s love will extinguish forever the shadows of shame cast by violence, suffering, sorrow, and contempt.

To help proclaim that God’s new world is at hand, we have written four “alternative” candle lighting litanies for personal or congregation use during the holy season of Advent. Each litany begins by telling the truth about a world that is all too barren of God’s hope, peace, joy, and love. Then, after the candle has been lit, we cry out with all people of faith - past, present, and future - that God is, even now, overwhelming the world!

Feel free to use these wherever you go this Advent - proclaiming all the while that the night sky always gives way to the dawn. Adapt them and make them your own!

### **Advent Litany for Advent One (Hope)**

Reader One: When I look around, I see shadows of hunger. So many people in this city and around the world will go to bed hungry tonight...

Reader Two: When I look around, I see shadows of injustice, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, everyone saying, "Buy, buy, buy!" - and someone somewhere will fall asleep under a bridge tonight...

Reader One: In the face of hunger, we light a candle of hope...

Reader Two: In the face of injustice, in the face of despair, we light a candle of hope... (*Light the first candle in your Advent wreath.*)

Reader One: Let the light from this candle say to all that God’s hope is coming on earth as it already is in heaven.

Reader Two: Friends, be not afraid, God’s hope is at hand!

HWB #186 “Fling wide the door, unbar the gate! (One License #86211)

STS #3 “Come, Light of the world” (used by permission of Randall L. Spaulding)

HWB #175 “O Savior, rend the heavens wide” (One License #07550)

STJ #29 “You are all we have” (One License #00192)

STS #4 “Rejoice, rejoice, the Savior comes” (Public Domain)

“O Savior, rend the heavens wide”, so goes the hymn that was just sung. The NRSV changes that word “rend” from the KJV and RSV to tear, and I am fine with the modification. It did get me thinking, though, about the rends and tears in the Bible and our lives, and what all this might mean for Advent. This morning I will explore what Sacred tears might mean.

I begin with the observation that the English language is a nightmare to learn. When playing Monopoly on a cold Advent afternoon, if one draws a specific *Chance* card does one take a ride on the Reading Railroad or the Reading Railroad? One can **rear** a family—meaning to bring up children—and one also can place a late comer to worship in the **rear** of the sanctuary: same spelling, same pronunciation, different meaning. Tear and tear is another one of those crazy English words with an identical spelling that has a varied meaning contingent upon the context. A tear in the eye is a salty bit of moisture which may or may not trickle down a cheek. A tear in the shirt is an unwelcome discovery at day’s end as was the case one fateful day for me coming home from work from the church office (*hold up shirt which has a tear*). In the case of tear and tear, a tear can cause a tear, at least when the tear appears in a beloved shirt. This connection is not far off from the various usages of this term “tear” otherwise translated “rend” (עָרַר) that we find in the Hebrew bible.

When Old Testament characters hear sad news of loved ones or unfortunate happenings in the realm, they tear their garments as a reflection of their grief (Gen 37:29,34; Gen 44:13; Num 14:6; Josh 7:6; etc...). This word is not the same as weeping (הִבֵּךְ), but there is emotional freight when people tear their garments at bad news; the tears of clothes reflecting, perhaps, tears of loss. In the books of Samuel, Kings, and the Chronicles we hear about lands being “torn” from the clutches of unjust kings; tears in territorial governance reflecting the tears of God at poor leadership. In Joel 2:13 we hear the prophet begging a wayward people to tear (עָרַר) their hearts and not their garments; let rent hearts reflect a break with hurtful behavior.

The Greek word for “tear” (σχίζω) has different roots than its Hebrew counter-part and yet we find a similar relationship between tears and tears. At the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9-10) the heavens are torn apart with God affirming a beloved son; God’s joy-filled emotion slices through any separation of heaven and earth. When Jesus dies, the temple curtain is torn in two (Mark 15:28); through the sacrifices of Jesus barriers to the Holy of Holies is rent asunder. In Acts there is dissension among the early church, a schism of sorts, (Acts 23:7), and it no doubt caused Divine tears to flow.

This Advent I am hopeful that the tears of God continue to be inter-related with the tears we have here on earth. I like the idea of a God whose deep joy over us rips through that which keeps us from seeing ourselves as beloved children. I like the idea of a God who sees the injustices of our world and through the prophets invites us to tear apart those inequalities; systems and structures which do not serve Godly intentions. I like the idea of a Jesus whose life and death gives us incarnated access to the Holy of Holies by tearing apart that which stands in the way.

These are not images of a warrior God breaking into our world with flame and Divine retribution that I have often equated with Isaiah 64:1; that is a God many have come to fear. Instead, this is the God of mercy who ministers to us and our world through fierce love and fearless sacrifice. This is an incarnation which comes through a young un-wed mother, through a defenseless infant, through a surrogate father unsure of next steps. Christmas comes to us on the slant. It is so slant, in fact, we are apt to miss it. In this respect, and to echo the words of Mark 13, we do well to pay attention / to keep awake / to “aufpassen”.

I suspect, many of us know the classic line from Leonard Cohen’s song *Anthem* which goes... “There is a crack in everything, that is how the light gets in”. There are cracks, tears in our lives, some of which we have made and others which have been imposed upon us. Advent and Isaiah 64 petitions and insists that God’s light will break upon us offering us healing and hope. Let us pay attention to the spiritual subtleties around us. How does or might this attention to God entering into our world through rips and rends happen? A few stories are in order.

First, I really affirm the reflection from Stephanie Lobdell which Susanne shared in her sermon last week.<sup>1</sup> This is case and point of a crack in our lives, one with which many of us are born and one that God’s presence through a community and science can enter redemptively. Thank you, Susanne, for offering that example last week. Other tears in our lives are a making of our choice and sometimes a blending of our choices and DNA

Most of us know that we have had an AA group meeting in our church space the last number of years, and we are striving to try finding ways for them to continue gathering at NPMC in this COVID-19 world. As a thank you gift for access to our space they have made sure pastors have a copy of their introductory book to AA. I will quote from a writer who is reflecting on the topic of alcoholism, but the paragraph cited could refer to a multitude of issues with which good people struggle: eating disorders, control issues, gambling addictions, pornography addiction, out of control spending, and other habituated tears in our

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npmc.net/2020-sermons.html>

lives. Many people are waiting for a Savior to rend the heavens wide, or at least to stream in through the cracks we exhibit. I think they are fitting comments related to Advent: The author writes:

*There is a solution.* Almost none of us liked the self-searching, the leveling of our pride, the confession of shortcomings which the process requires for its successful consummation. But we saw that it really worked in others, and we had come to believe in the hopelessness and futility of life as we had been living it... The great fact is just this, and nothing less: that we have had deep and effective spiritual experiences which have revolutionized our whole attitude toward life, toward our [relationships] and toward God's universe. The central fact of our lives today is the absolute certainty that our Creator has entered into our hearts and lives in a way which is indeed miraculous. He has commenced to accomplish those things for us which we could never do by ourselves".<sup>2</sup>

Advent affirms this impulse. We are not in control of much we thought we had control over. So at some point we surrender. We wait and watch. I am struck by the "attentive nature" of our lectionary scripture texts from this morning. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians (to be read as the benediction) mentions "waiting" even as the Mark passage (which we did not read this morning) references keeping awake. Keeping awake and waiting is not active, but neither is it inactive. Sometimes keeping awake is the best we can do. This brought to mind a poem, a kind of a prayer, authored by Walter Brueggemann in his most recent book: *Virus as a Summons to Faith*:<sup>3</sup> The prayer is entitled "From Self to Thou".

You, holy, faithful, merciful God,  
have called us into being,  
given us names, faces, and vocations, and  
we live them out in freedom.

In our freedom, we notice only sometimes, that  
we cannot cope with all that comes at us,  
we cannot finally outflank the forces that address us, and  
we cannot by ourselves deal with the grief, trouble, and anger that  
well up in us.

After our imagined autonomy, we gladly turn back to you.  
After we have said "I" for a very long time, we fall back to Thou;  
we utter the "Thou" who inhabits our memories,  
memories of rescue, healing, and forgiveness;

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<sup>2</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Big Book* (NY: Alcoholic Anonymous World Services, Inc., 2001), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), p. 56.

we utter the “thou” who occupies our best hopes,  
as we hope for peace, wellbeing, and justice in the world.  
We move back into faithful dialogue with you:  
we say “thou” as we say thank and praise you;  
we say “I” as we act out our freedom and accept our responsibility.  
Just now, in the face of the virus, we find our best “I” without force,  
and so we say “thou,”  
“thou” in power,  
“thou” in mercy,  
“thou” in faithfulness.  
finally “Thou”!  
We remember all your wonders, and then, in gladness,  
we remember who we are as yours:  
we recover our gratitude, our hope, our resolve, and our confidence.  
- Amen

This poem reflects the power of speaking our intentions, and as we speak our intentions we become actors in the creating of a new creation even as the prophets did this as they spoke. The scribes did this as they wrote. The people of God did this as they enacted the spoken and written word. A part of waiting is acting. To be attentive, then, is not simply to receive but to participate.

In that vein I share the stories of Diane Nash and John Lewis. Many of us, I think, know the name of John Lewis who died earlier this year. John was a young black man in the 1960s who courageously faced batons and police dogs through non-violent marches intended to break down the racism of his land. In one of his sermons John Lewis was given the text of Matthew that reads “I have not come send peace, but a sword” (10:34). His reflection on this was that, in context, “Jesus means that strife must come before serenity, darkness before light. “The sword was not a blade but a spiritual sword,” Lewis recalled. “We were going to tear down the old world—patiently, and non-violently. But that is what we were going to do.”<sup>4</sup> Oh savior rend the heavens wide—dear God, tear apart that which needs tearing apart and use us as needed.

Not so many of us know the name Diane Nash, but she was there with Lewis through most of those tumultuous days. She too, and equally as much, was about the business of rending hearts and not just ceremonial clothes. “Born and raised in the northern city of Chicago, Nash moved to the heart of the Jim Crow South as a

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<sup>4</sup> John Meacham, *His Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope*, (New York, Random House: 2020), p. 87.

young person...Almost immediately, the culture shock gave way to outrage at the overt racial segregation that had defined life for black Americans.” Nash entered the non-violent moment which later attracted John Lewis. Based upon interactions with Gandhi, the volunteers were trained in the philosophy of Satyagraha, which roughly translates to “clinging to truth.”<sup>5</sup> Nash became the social organizer and public relations speaker for the protests in Nashville and beyond.<sup>6</sup> With their tears Diane Nash and John Lewis worked with God in tearing the heavens open.

Tears and tears happen in personal ways, and sometimes these extend into the religious and social realm. The prophets of our Bible and the scribes recording these things would not have it any different. What we are waiting for as individuals or the faith community is likely that for which society at large is waiting. It is a matter of us owning our hopes, our fears, our shortcomings—entrusting this all to God and allowing the Divine ruminator to create something good in us and this world. We trust. We wait. We act as prompted. This season we are waiting for so much (a vaccine, a return to some semblance of normal, a new start, and so forth). We are waiting. And we are acting, as we wait, in accordance with what we understand to be God’s intentions. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/apr/06/diane-nash-non-violent-protest-civil-rights-gandhi-martin-luther-king>

<sup>6</sup> Meacham, 73.