

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 Cor. 1:3-9 “Signs and Wonders of Advent”

Our scriptures are filled with contrasts, spanning from creation in Genesis of the Hebrew Bible to the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. One recurring theme is that of suffering of us earthly creatures and redemption by God. Our first reading from Isaiah captures the “crying out” of the Israelite people, suffering from the seemingly endless cycle of oppression, resistance, conquest, and exile.

“For you have hidden Your face from us”

“Where are you, God?”

“Do you not hear the wails of your people?” Isaiah informs us.

We can find numerous parallels when we compare THEN and NOW (2008). THEN, it was the violence, destruction and exile of the people of Israel, more than 2500 years ago. THEN, it was the fall of the Temple and of its central role in worship and the Ancient Near Eastern economy. THEN, it was God’s chosen people. NOW, it is more global in scale, places like Darfur, Mumbai, the Gulf Coast, and yes, still the Middle East, still the Holy City. NOW it is the fall of the economic hegemony of global financial services, loss of home values, loss of retirement funds, home foreclosures, loss or threatened jobs, too much debt and too little capital. NOW, even more so, we see the world globally, filled with strife, suffering, and threats that challenge us from Mogadishu, from Kabul, from Wall Street, to Main Street.

The Psalmist in Psalm 80 captures the same despondence of God’s people calling out from there hearts

“Where are you, God?” How mournful and close to our own hearts is:

“God, you have fed us bread of tears....” And

“God, you have made us drink tears by the bowlful.”

Both Isaiah and the psalmist beseech God through a narrative form that we call “lamentation”. We lament, we cry out, from sorrow, from bitterness, and often from frustration with God. I certainly know that I have used lamentations in my prayers with God. I think most of us have, which raises the question,

“Is it God who makes us despondent and cry out “where are you God?”

Answer: Often is it not our sins and fallen nature that makes us feel the God has “hidden His face from us”. Most often it is our loss of faith in God, which we project onto God as “hiding His face from us”.

Our questions, our queries, our lamentations, our crying out through prayers that we simply accept as pleas reaching out to God, I think, are something more. Often when we are reaching out to God, we are really reaching out through God, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit to ourselves. What we are seeking is to find our faith if it is lost, to strengthen our faith if it is weak. Has God hidden His face from us, or rather, have we hidden our faith from Him.

Advent is a precious season for all Christians and an opportunity to revisit the lamentations of Isaiah, the lamentations of the psalmist, and our own lamentations, asking questions such as: “Does God hear us? How will we know? What are the signs? The answer abounds in the Scriptures, in the history of our earthly creatures, and in our everyday life, namely God irrupts into human history into human life through signs and wonders. Throughout time, the past, the

present age, and the ages to come, God irrupts with signs and wonders. Let's just touch the surface and ponder a few examples.

Creation: Creation is an irruption of God, our earthly beauty is the sign and His desire to have us accompany him throughout the ages is the wonder. Creation was a sign and Adam and Eve are the wonders. The mark on Cain was a sign of God's irruption, the birth of Seth was the wonder.

Flood narrative: Flood was a sign of God's irruption, Noah and the promise of God was the wonder.

Promise to Abraham: God's promise to Abraham was a sign, and the persistence of Abraham's promise, to Isaac, to Jacob, to Joseph, and ultimately to us is the wonder.

Prophetic call of Moses: The burning bush on Mt. Horeb was a sign from God, irrupting into the life of Moses, our freedom from bondage that lives today in human hearts is the wonder.

Prophetic calls to Hannah and to Elizabeth: The irruption of God into these prophetic barren women was the sign and the births of Samuel and John-the-Baptist, respectively, were the true wonder.

Annunciation of Mary: The angel Gabriel brings the message of God to the peasant girl Mary as a sign. We celebrate each year both the annunciation and mark the beginning of our "church" time in the advent that culminates truly in the greatest wonder of all, the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

God irrupts into our lives; God irrupts into our ordinary everyday lives; God irrupts into our "ordinary time", resetting our clocks; and God brings us signs and wonders. But why? Is it because God has disappointed us? Hardly, we have so often assumed our fallen nature, that of the free-willed earthly creatures God has so loved that He created us to be with Him for all the ages. No, it is not because the face of God is hidden. God's desire is to "right" our faces toward Him, to "right" our prideful selves toward Him, and to "right" the resistant, stiff-necked people of God to Him, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When we are "right" with God, his Grace, his Love, and his Forgiveness irrupt our lives, in the new Way that Jesus taught us.

God irrupts into our lives, making a way for what I call the "*Holy to irrupt the Daily*". What signs and wonders do we here in the winter of 2008 perceive with the "eyes of our hearts". Look around ourselves, even in

the depths of disappointment and despair of these challenging times. Use the eyes of our hearts to sense the radiance, power, and love of God as a sign that leads us to the wonder of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

God hears the wails and laments of His people and irrupts into our lives today, NOT as a mountain top in the desert, NOT as a column of fire in the night, NOT as a temple of stone in the Holy City, NOT as burning bush, but rather through the purest of grace, friends, through the birth of a divine human, the Word enfleshed and living among us. Especially when our lives and our world is a mess (sound painfully familiar in 2008?), God irrupts our lives, we call God through Jesus Christ to restore us, to "right" our face, to "right" our faith.

So, what do the signs and wonders of God mean in the Advent season? Let's consider 4 real signs and wonders accessible to us all:

#1. We can re-start our church calendar, our lives' calendar at Advent, opening the eyes of our hearts to be nearer to God in solemn celebration of the coming of our Lord.

#2. Paul tells us in 1st Corinthians 1 that we are enriched in speaking and knowledge in Christ, we are empowered anew!

#3. Paul reminds us in the here-and-now that like his nascent Jesus followers in 1st century Palestine, we live in God through justification by our faith and our own testimony about Christ. Let's take time in Advent for more reflection on what the birth of Jesus has meant to us all: love, forgiveness, caring for others, and most of all everlasting life with God.

#4. Paul reminds us in 1st Corinthians 1 that through the sign of God's gracious absolution, through our life in Jesus Christ, we are kept "blameless" by the powers of Christ, until He comes again. To be held blameless as the fallen creatures that we are is a true wonder. The power of Christ works against our corruption, temptation, and fallenness.

So what is our "take-home" message for our faith in the 1st Sunday of Advent, 2008?

#1. God, who calls us into fellowship with Jesus Christ is faithful.

#2. God irrupts into our lives through signs and wonders.

#3. Jesus Christ is the greatest of these signs, the wonder of the Word enfleshed, dwelling among us, being crucified for our sins and resurrected by God from the power of death to gain us life everlasting with God.

The secular side of Christmas will be a challenge for all of us, none of us escape the economic uncertainties and misfortunes. But let us remind ourselves, almost continually in Advent, that we have been privileged to experience God's promise in Jesus. Our Christmas season this year, we pray, will be filled with the Grace of the Creator, the love of the Redeemer, and the fellowship of the Sustainer. Let the *Holy irrupt the Daily*, as we embrace Advent this year. Let us bless each other with gifts of Christian love, acceptance, forgiveness, support, and caring. Finally, my notes end with

"Plus confession".....secular holidays versus Christian Holy Days....what's going on? I ask you, *what was the "best" Christmastime of your life?* Was it the best gift you remember? Mine was standing right there in the balcony of this church with my wife, spending Christmas Eve with this congregation when many things in our lives were a mess. Times were tight, gift budgets (oh how I hate this notion at all) were tight, relations with kids were strained, but the blessing of the celebration of the birth of Jesus simply overcame us both and made the following morning a blessed, warm memory. I have labored for 2 days with this sermon trying to find a way to push aside the secular holidays and let the Holy irrupt into the Daily. My single wish is that the words of this sermon help us to see through the secular to the sacred, from Madison Avenue to a manger, then at least some small wonder will have been worked through our faith in God.

Let us pray, God, we come to you with the greatest of hope that we may reflect upon the Advent season and greatest wonder of all. Help us to distill away the secular pressures, daily pressures, and let the Holy irrupt into the Daily in our hearts. The greatest gifts that we can give or receive this year, cannot be wrapped, need not be mailed, and will never be returned. Our great gifts are Christian love and fellowship. May we keep the eyes of our hearts upon the Advent, as we celebrate O Almighty God, the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.