

Hopefulness Begins In Lament

“O come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!”

The mournful beauty of traditional Advent hymns...paradoxically, Advent begins with lament. In the language of biblical scholarship, a lament is a prayer to God for help in a time of need. A substantial portion of Isaiah is a beautiful example of lament poetry. Isaiah's poems are often a cry of pain seeking understanding. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” is one of Isaiah's mournful verses that speak of hope.

God always offers a word of hope; God announces comfort for those long held captive in Babylon, and John preaches to announce the good news of Jesus. As the time of Advent anticipates the turn from darkness to light, we move from lament to hope.

In ancient Israel, a prophet's main job was to talk to God. A prophet was to represent the people with God and to speak for God to the people. If you spend some time studying the writings of the Jewish prophets, you will find that their ability to speak with any truth about God's will for the future rested in their deep and embodied knowledge of their people's history.

Sometimes our prophets shook their fists angrily at the heavens and demanded that God reveal God's-self just as God had done in the past. Such an act is in itself a statement of hope.

Hope is what is left when our worst fears have been realized and our self-help optimism has been extinguished. Hope is what comes to a broken heart willing to be mended. Consequently, even in the midst of chaos, despair and what we perceive as God's silence, our prophets teach us to have hope.

The story of the Israelites' return from captivity is an Advent story. This is a story of darkness and light. This is a story of despair and hope. This is our story, too.

With mournful beauty, Advent acknowledges that there is darkness. People suffer and struggle – life is fragile and sometimes we fail. Sometimes others fail us.

In Advent, we are reminded that Jesus' presence can pierce the darkness and scatter despair; he is a candle in the darkness. The love of God, so profoundly present in Jesus, is with us always whether our path is shrouded in darkness or basked in light. God is with us even to the end of the age.

Like ancient Israel, we are a nation in desperate need of moving from lament to hope. But the love of God, made exquisitely visible in Jesus is powerful enough to pierce the darkness and scatter despair.

In order for this to become a reality in us, we must first acknowledge the truth of our distance and separation from God's hope for the world—distance and separation from God's hope is what we call sin--Jesus has the power to heal precisely because he shows us how close to God's hope we can really be.

He asked us to follow him—this means to claim our own ability to be a people who can love as he loved—a love that crosses barriers, breaks down despair and claims justice and compassion for all of God's people---especially those for whom the world is an inhospitable and dangerous place.

Jesus shows us the way to peace, justice and reconciliation---a way that rises above both the need for vengeance or the need to hide from the truth. We know that there are places where we have created deep wounds in the human family by either our actions or by our failure to act.

Our prophets always promise a new action of God. And in John the Baptist's proclamation this coming Sunday, the past is joined with the future; lament is joined with hope.

Like God pronouncing comfort to ancient Israel in exile, John pronounces hope in the radical newness of Jesus.

The past – our history – can be a burden. When we carry around too much of our baggage as individuals or a nation, we struggle to see beyond our baggage; we can be blind to the newness of the future and to the abundant and absurd grace found there.

I see what is happening now as a time to be emptied of our anger, hurt, guilt and loss. We need to make room for hope. God desires space in our lives, in our nation and in our world to come among us. Lament leaves us empty... ready... for God. God announces the promise of newness and comfort for a people in sorrow. A voice cries out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God...

O come, Desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind,
Bid thou our sad divisions cease, and be thyself our King of Peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!
Advent Blessings, Stephanie+