

Second Sunday of Advent Year B

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church

December 6, 2020

Deacon Dennis Taylor, RN

The Second Sunday of Advent, we are launched into Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary with a focus on the Gospel of Mark. While we look at time in as linear, the church has elected to tell its story in a recurrent three year cycle, like a spiral, it comes around but at a different location. Advent is the four Sundays preceding Christmas; we look back, look to the present and look forward to the birth of Jesus and return contemplating the meanings of those event for us and the world. The words we hear at Advent; fear, anticipation, comfort, lamentation or lament and mercy calls us to stop, take the time and consider the meaning of Immanuel, “God is with us”.

Lamentation or lament seems like a good place to start as our lectionary for Advent begins with Isaiah’s charge against God “But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. ... 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.” Isaiah 64 and is written after the return from exile and Judah and Jerusalem aren’t as sweet as promised.

It is a complaint that usually begins a lament. There can be a reminder of what God has done in the past and Isaiah almost gets to the magic question of: But what have you done for us lately? Do we need to ask who has hidden whose face from whom. Instead Isaiah confesses the people’s sin and makes what can also be included in a lament; the request, reconciliation, and expression of trust Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; 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 our iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Today we go back to Isaiah 40 just before the end of the Exile and hear God's promise "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." And ends with the picture of a shepherd that "...will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep" A gracious picture of God whose has gone from warrior to nurturer.

The practice of laments has decreased in the modern age. Maybe lament make us look weak and vulnerable. Shows a lack of faith in terms of the prosperity gospel that underpins so much of American Christianity. Could they be too Jewish? Tevye and the show Fiddler on the Roof is a very public vision of what a lament can be:

O dear Lord; you made many, many poor people. I realize, of course, that there is no shame in being poor. But it's no great honor either. So what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?

And the show goes from there as Tevye and the village of Anatevka deal with the ordeals that humans visit on each other. We see a vision of a people who have a very personal relationship with their creator and we need to remember that our cries are not too much for God. [God] laments with us. In fact, [God] wants us to come to the [Divine Presence] in our anger, in our fear, in our loneliness, in our hurt, and in our confusion. This allows us to sustain ourselves on this journey. Suffering has an ability to pull us into together.

Prayers of lament arise in us when we sit and speak out to God and one another—stunned, sad, and silenced by the tragedy and absurdity of human events. We are in the middle of an old/new trauma, Covid 19, is just the latest pandemic humanity has had to deal with. The science may be more advanced and the technology makes isolating, distancing or quarantining easier for those

who are privileged, not an essential worker or without Internet connection. We are still saddened and haven't learned how to grieve the ill and dead of this scourge.

Regaining our ability to lament we can relearn to hear the wincing of pain of those who are hurting, mourning and struggling. Rabbi Goldie Milgram puts it, "Lament is to remember where it hurts, how it got that way, to tell the journey, to honor the pain, not become the story." Holding space for lament is sacred work and it is our holy calling at this time. There is a need to be humble and listen to the pain, rage and grief from the lips of our siblings around the world. Engaging with God to show, convict, and equip us with a zeal for God's justice.

Covid brings much to lament about. It also brings much to anticipate and teach us. Most of all it is calling us to honestly look at the lives we lived before the pandemic and turn from where we were injuring creation and build up what we did to nurture that creation.

There are many ills in the world some coming around again in the spiral of life, some increasing some decreasing, there is very little, if anything, new under the sun. It has happened before and humanity has been held to account before. Increasing nationalism/racism that denies the humanity of those who do not match one's definition of child of God. The increasing violence in our homes and streets. Lack of grief for the Black and Brown men and women who are killed extrajudicially every 28 hours¹. For those without shelter, the hungry and those without healthcare and those afraid of the health care system, those oppressed by the current justice system and those who are part of that system. There is a long history to all parts of this list and the world keeps cycling back around to similar behavior. The church is called to speak, Forgive me when I have remained silent and like John decrease, so that our siblings who live on the underside of history may increase.

I believe that much of humanity's evil acts can be laid at the feet of fear, greed and a lust for power. The fear of the different, the fear of losing power, place, and privilege. Having my abundance taken away or even shared with those who have been excluded from the opportunity of obtaining and sharing in that abundance. Perhaps even a fear that if I lose my place on top, I will be treated as I have treated others. Anticipation

2 Peter speaks of God's patience with us, not wanting any to perish but to come to repentance. Nor does God want us to sit still and let injustice continue. Exclusion, oppression, or exploitation by others or for my own enrichment primarily or secondary to that exploitation, serves to place me outside of the circle. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. Remembering that some version of do not be afraid is a commandment in every book of scripture we need to anticipate the gift of letting go of this fear that leads to evil.

That leaves mercy and anticipation and as Kathleen Norris has said "it is hard to lay claim to mercy in a culture that encourages to be less than merciful." When the loudest are polarized to the point of denying the right of the other side to even exist. When my values are all that count and yours are of the devil, and we long for the day of the Lord to punish those we disagree with. That the day of the Lord being a Hollywood-style vengeance thriller. Mercy is not what we're about, and we don't want our God to be about it either.

John the baptizer, the crazy guy in camel hair and a leather belt in the wilderness, proclaiming a more powerful one will come after him, preaching repentance and so the forgiveness of sin. One of God's messengers calling us to wake up and help prepare the way. The watchman at the door warning that the master is returning. There is no room for revenge and judging of those we detest and believe will not be granted salvation. Judgement is well above our pay grade and it is God's patience that is salvation for all of God's children. It is when we recognize that we have

been baptized with the Holy Spirit and have committed to a new family and the covenant of the Kingdom and made to recognize our own neediness that we will finally stand, lost in wonder, praise, and maybe a little exasperation and give thanks in the old expletive of Kathleen Norris' grandmother, O Mercy!

A prayer for unity found in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only saviour, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions. Take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatsoever else may hinder us from godly union and concord: that, as there is but one Body, and one Spirit, and one hope of our ailing, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all; so we may henceforth be all of one heart, and of one soul united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

1 Rev. Dr. Yolanda Pierce, Director of the Center for Black Church Studies & Associate Professor of Religion & Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary Nov. 25, 2014