

## **Message for November 29, 2020**

### **Advent 1**

#### **Isaiah 64:1-4**

A number of years ago the well-respected Lutheran pastor and thinker Martin Marty wrote a very thought-provoking book entitled “A Cry of Absence”. In that book he claimed that all of us are on a spiritual journey that goes in cycles which, in many ways, parallel the four seasons of the year. First of all there is spring which is of course the time of beginnings and new life. At that time the seeds of faith are planted and everything seems to be so fresh and alive; God and his presence, love and forgiveness are so very real to us. And just as spring is followed by summer, so it is in our spiritual journey. Summer is the time when the seeds of faith sprout and grow and life is generally good. To be sure there may be a few storms but overall the journey is a positive one. And of course we all know what comes after the summer. Autumn is the time of harvest and taking stock and it is then that we can look back and take satisfaction in what we have done and accomplished. After that however comes winter and that, the winter of the soul, is the prime focus of Marty’s book.

Marty says that just as the winter season comes every year bringing ice, snow and cold, so too does it come on our spiritual journey. The winter of the soul can be caused by many things. It may be triggered by such as illness or failing health whether it be our own or someone else’s. The winter of the soul may also be triggered by the death of someone near and dear to us or perhaps by what is happening in the world around us, and the present pandemic with all of its upsets comes to mind. Whatever the cause may be though, in the winter of the soul we feel lost and everything seems to be so bleak, hopeless and maybe even pointless. In the winter of the soul even God himself seems to be absent and this is a terrible feeling, especially for us, the people of faith. “Where are you God? Don’t you care about us?” we cry. “Why don’t you do something to help us?” In our

heartache and pain we utter what Marty calls “a cry of absence”. The cry of absence; that may well describe today’s scripture passage too.

Today’s passage was written at the time of the Babylonian Exile and it is hard for many of us to appreciate just what an unmitigated disaster it was for God’s people. Perhaps some of the numbers may give us a better understanding. It has been estimated that there were approximately 250,000 Jews living in the Holy Land before the conquest and exile but afterwards there were only 20,000 left and virtually all of them were living in Babylon. To put that in perspective, it would be like a disaster befalling our own nation and everyone in Canada outside of the GTA perishing. Indeed the scale of the disaster was the ancient equivalent of the Holocaust and the words of the 137<sup>th</sup> psalm reflect how many of the people felt:

“By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,  
when we remembered Zion.  
There on the poplars we hung our harps,  
for our captors demanded songs of joy.  
They said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’  
How can we sing the songs of the Lord  
while in a foreign land?”

This was the situation when Isaiah wrote his “cry of absence” which makes up today’s scripture passage. But even as he gave voice to his pain, Isaiah still clung to the hope that God could and would do something for his people.

“O that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains would tremble before you!”

Even in the winter of his soul, Isaiah clung to the hope that all was not lost and that spring would return for both him and his people. One day,

some day, God would rend the heavens and the Messiah would come! Not surprisingly, many people took Isaiah's words of hope literally and believed that the Messiah would come from heaven like a great warlord and rescue them from all their trials and tribulations.

Well, as we all know Isaiah's cry of absence was answered but not in the way that most people expected it to be. When the Messiah finally came, God did not rend the heavens and neither did the mountains quake. In fact at first no one even knew that the cry had been answered except for a peasant couple, some humble shepherds and a few traveling magi. In the words of that great Christmas hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem, "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!"

This is how the cry of absence was answered; it was answered with a baby lying in a manger rather than with a warlord rending the heavens. In that child God became a part of us rather than apart from us. In Christ, God joined us so that he could know, share and experience life as we do. In Christ, God also became one of us so that one day we will know, share and experience life in all of its glorious abundant fullness just as he does. And God has also promised that he, in the person of Christ will return again.

This is the theme of today, this being the First Sunday in Advent. Our cry of absence will be answered by the eventual return of Christ in the Second Coming. Of course in virtually every generation there have been those who expected the cry to be answered right then and there. The early Christians for example expected Jesus to return sooner rather than later and for that reason were reluctant to marry and have children. With the fall of the Roman Empire and the resultant chaos, many expected the return of Jesus. Some were sure that the Second Coming would happen in the year 1000 AD and then, more recently, in the year 2000 AD. Even now during the present pandemic there has been no shortage of self-styled prophets who have loudly proclaimed that Christ is returning at any time.

The truth of course is that no one really knows when Christ will return and even Jesus himself said that he didn't know when. But where does

this leave us if we feel trapped in the winter of the soul and God seems to be as far away as the stars in the night sky? It is fine to say that Christ was with us 2000 years ago and that he will return again some time in the future but how does that help us here and now?

The truth of course is that God is never truly absent. To use an analogy, God is like the sun.

There are days when there isn't a cloud in the sky and we bask in the sun's warmth and light. On other days though, the sun is obscured by the clouds and everything seems rather dull, grey and gloomy. And there are days when it is raining or even storming and there is no sign of the sun whatsoever. And yet, as we all well know, the sun is still there, it's simply a case that we aren't aware of it. And so it is with us and God. Even when God seems to be absent, he really isn't. He is still there; he is still here, even when everything seems to be so bleak and hopeless. In the words of the 139<sup>th</sup> psalm:

“Where can I go to escape your spirit?  
Where could I flee from your presence?  
If I climb the heavens, you are there!  
There too if I lie in Sheol.”

And of course there are also the words and promise of Christ himself: “Lo, I am with you always, to the end of time”.

It doesn't matter what season we are in as we make our way on our spiritual journey, whether it be spring, summer, autumn or winter; God is always with us. And we should remember too that no matter how long or harsh the winter may be, even when it seems as if it will last forever, it won't. Spring always returns and as it is in nature, so it is with us and our spiritual journey. As cold, bleak and seemingly endless as the winter of the soul may seem to be, it will not last. Spring will come and the cry of absence will be answered.