

“The Advent Cry”:  
A Sermon For Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017 (First Sunday of Advent)  
by Foster Freed

Isaiah 64: 1-9

It was the best of times...but it was also the worst of times. That was true of Mr. Dickens' time; true of the time of the French Revolution of which Mr. Dickens' was writing. It is certainly true of our mixed-bag of a time. And yes...yes...most definitely true of the Biblical time in which a certain prophet spoke forth: pleading with God to rend the heavens...pleading with God to shake the very mountains...pleading with God, quite simply, to come down. To come down and **do** something! To come down and pretty much do anything...something that might reveal, in a tangible way, the hand of the LORD.

And it can be helpful, I think, helpful to ponder the life and times of the prophet we now tend to refer to as Third Isaiah...it can be helpful to ponder his life and times in light of that mixed bag of good and bad...best and worst. Recall that modern scholarship tends to think of the book Isaiah as a composite work: comprised of prophecies delivered over the span of a couple of centuries. The final section of the book, starting with its 56<sup>th</sup> chapter, is generally thought to come from a time after the Jewish exiles had been permitted to return to Jerusalem after 70 years in Babylon. The fact that they had returned home most definitely made it the best of times. And yet, the fact that the land and the city to which they returned still bore all of the painful marks of the Babylonian conquest—that their home was the ultimate fixer-upper—made this in a very real sense, the worst of times. And so the prophet cries out! And so the prophet cries to God: asking God to act, asking God to intervene, asking God to remember that he cries out on behalf of a people who are God's people. Not by any means a perfect people...

...the prophet is under no illusion on that score...

...but neither is he satisfied to keep a steely silence. Nor does he choose the “put on a happy face, let's pretend everything is ducky” countenance that we so often choose. No: this prophet—like those who came before him and those who will come after him—this prophet is not afraid to ask God the ultimate question of faith. “How long, O Lord, how long?”

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There is, I believe, no wrong time for the asking of that question. On the other hand, I am convinced that Advent—this four Sunday season, which this year actually lasts but three weeks since Christmas Eve will coincide with Advent 4...

....I am convinced that Advent is an especially apt time for the asking of that question. In our popular culture, December is first and foremost the month during which we exhaust ourselves getting ready for Christmas. Given the centrality of Christmas even in our post-Christendom North America, that's hardly surprising and may not really be such an awful thing. But spiritually speaking, Advent is a time for recalling the **absence** of God as much as we may wish to recall the **presence** of God: making this, indeed, both the best and the worst of times.

And often, far too often, I think we polite Christians are far too hesitant about crying out to God in our bewilderment, our confusion, our grief. And yes, I know that many of us were reared on a piety that took quite seriously the sentiment that lies behind that cherished Gospel hymn, the one that reminds us to:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
count your blessings, see what God has done.  
Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
count your many blessings, see what God has done.*

That may not be Bach, but it's solid stuff: good theology. So often we kvetch for no good reason. So often we have in our purview all of the things that go wrong with our lives, and thereby succeed in overlooking the things that go right. We clergy are no different on that score. If you can manage to get any preacher to be honest with you, they'll assure you that if they are greeted at the door—at the conclusion of the service—by 99 people who assure them that morning's sermon was the preaching equivalent of a Michaelangelo, but there is one person in the congregation who tells them that their sermon was awful: they will spend all of Sunday afternoon brooding about the one person who was less than impressed rather than focusing on the 99 who think that preacher is the cat's meow. And so yes: learning to count our blessings is a crucial spiritual practice: at Advent and at any other time of the year. And yet!

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Counting one's blessings does not imply a need for playing games with the truth. Counting one's blessings does not mean pretending that pain isn't pain...that suffering and loss don't sting...that failure and disappointment don't eat away at our hearts and minds as well as our stomach lining! Trust me on this! Of the many things God wants from us, lying is not anywhere to be found on that list. Counting one's blessings is a crucial way of putting things back in perspective. But crying out to God when there is injustice...when there is abuse...when there is neglect....when there are bad things happening to good people...even when there are good things happening to bad people! Crying out at such times is not unfaithful. God hears those inner cries whether we give them voice or not! We're not fooling anyone but ourselves when we deny ourselves the privilege of being who we really and truly are, when we stand in the presence of God. We may succeed in kidding ourselves! We won't succeed in fooling God.

And you know: there is a sense in which a failure to cry out to God, can be the surest sign of unfaithfulness on our part. I'm thinking, for instance, of this parade of news stories we are hearing about women—and in some instances men—who were abused by successful, talented, powerful people in news, sports, politics and entertainment. And—of course—people ask: “why didn't they speak up?” “Why didn't they do something if they were being treated so shabbily?” No doubt there are many factors at play. But surely part of the answer is that these vulnerable people, who were often new to their industry, likely assumed that's the way it is. I better just keep my mouth shut...because this must be the way everyone gets treated around here.

Perhaps even more chillingly, I think of orphaned infants we have likely all read about in places such as China or Romania. And the horrendous thing about their situation, is that they quickly learn to respond in the same way. At first those babies will do what all babies are programmed to do when something is amiss: they cry. Tragically, horribly...inconceivably...when that neglect goes on long enough...they stop crying. They realize that there is no point. They realize that no one is going to respond to them...that no one is going to hold them...that no one is going to love them. And so their silence...their silence speaks not of their faith...but of their despair. And yes: as noble as our silence can be...and as crucial as it is for us to see the blessing even in a time of desolation...it is also crucial that we not presume that God only wants our silence...especially if that silence carries with it the dread conviction that maybe God doesn't really care. That maybe God doesn't really hear. That maybe God isn't even there to hear and to care. Which suggests to me, at any rate...

...which suggests to me that there are times and places, seasons and good reasons why we too—like the ancient prophet—ought to cry out to God....why our Advent cry ought to go forth to the heavens, not as a display of our despair, but as a sign of our faith, our confident trust that even though the world appears, at times, to be going to hell in a handbasket, that we know...that we know...that we know in our bones...that our redeemer lives!

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Permit me a final thought: a thought I have shared on more than one occasion.

We will be coming to this table at the end of our worship: this table at which we will receive a small morsel of bread or wafer, and a tiny cup of juice. And yes: there are times—especially when I ponder the sheer lavishness of what Christ gives us at this table...

...there are times when I think that this table ought to be as lavish with gifts of bounty, as Christ's sacrifice on the Cross was lavish with endless blessing: blessing upon blessing upon blessing. Nevertheless: there is a deep logic to what happens here when we receive those small gifts of bread and juice...gifts which have the power to fill us and yet gifts that inevitably leave us still hungry...leave us wanting more...leave us looking for more...in short...in short:

...leave us with the Advent cry in our hearts and on our lips!

O that you would rend the heavens, dear God! O that you would show us your majesty and your grace. Maranatha! Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus come! Come here! Come soon! Come now!

Thanks be to God!