

Advent 1, Year B, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today  
is the first Sunday of Advent.  
The altar hangings have changed to purple,  
the flowers have been replaced with greens,  
and we've sung the first verses of O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

It might be the last day of November in the secular calendar,  
but in the church's calendar  
this is the first day  
of a new year.

Everyone else  
is rushing headlong towards Christmas,  
trees up,  
carols playing,  
shopping to be done.

And we're out of step.  
And nowhere more  
than our readings today.

The Old Testament reading  
seems to be all about our sin  
and God's anger;  
the gospel  
warnings of an apocalyptic earth  
and a command to wait;  
and beside them,  
the New Testament reading  
a kind of blandly nice thanksgiving  
that seems like mere avoidance.

And then we come to the psalm.

It's starts so well, doesn't it?

"Hear, O Shepherd of Israel..."

And our minds go straight  
to that most beloved of psalms,

“The Lord is my shepherd;  
I shall not want.”

It’s there in our window,  
isn’t it.  
Jesus the good shepherd,  
gazing benignly on us,  
the one who cares for us and protects us  
and makes us feel safe.

But within a few words,  
that vision is disrupted.  
Because this isn’t some sort of idyllic pastoral vision.  
Instead  
this is a cry for help.

“Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock; \*  
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.  
In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, \*  
stir up your strength and come to help us.  
Restore us, O God of hosts; \*  
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.”

This psalm  
isn’t a psalm of celebration.  
It’s a psalm of lament,  
one of those psalms  
traditionally used  
by the whole community at worship in Jerusalem  
as they struggle to make sense of a world  
that is in a mess,  
where they can’t quite grasp  
how it is  
that God could be their shepherd  
caring for them, leading them,  
and at the same time  
they are in danger, threatened,  
afraid.

It most likely comes from a time

when the whole northern part of Israel  
was in trouble,  
probably during the time  
when the two halves of the promised land  
were ruled by separate kings.

The south was strong and secure,  
its king governing wisely  
and securing the nation.

The north, on the other hand,  
was weak, under attack,  
with no real leadership  
to speak of.

It might even have been the time  
when the Assyrians invaded  
and totally destroyed it.

They are refugees,  
seeing the destruction of everything that meant home to them,  
and they can't see God.

They can't see the God  
who brought them to  
this promised land,  
who led them from the time of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob  
to this holy landscape,  
and led them again, first to Egypt to freedom from famine,  
and then back again, across the Red Sea  
and the Jordan  
River,  
home to safety,  
where God would be their God  
and they would be God's people.

But it isn't safe.

Not now.

Their enemies are attacking,  
their homes are threatened,  
and they feel like God is angry at them,  
angry and distant and uncaring.

And they just wish,  
they wish above all else,  
above the defeat of their enemies  
and the preservation of their homes  
and the protection of their families,  
they just wish

that that they could catch  
a glimpse of God.

Because if they catch  
that glimpse of God,  
if they see the God  
who has always been their shepherd  
then they will know  
that God has not abandoned them,  
then they will know  
that they have been saved.

O LORD God of hosts, \*  
how long will you be angered  
despite the prayers of your people?  
You have fed them with the bread of tears; \*  
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.  
You have made us the derision of our neighbors, \*  
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.  
Restore us, O God of hosts; \*  
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

And they remember,  
they remember the times  
when God's light was seen.  
In the dream of Abraham,  
God calling him into covenant.  
In the pillar of fire,  
leading them out of Egypt.  
In the face of Moses,  
when he came down from Mount Sinai.  
And again and again and again,  
throughout the story of their people.

Always, always  
the light and fire of God  
calling them to new faithfulness.  
And so they make a promise,  
a promise  
never  
to turn away from God.

Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand, \*

the son of man you have made so strong for yourself.  
 And so will we never turn away from you; \*  
 give us life, that we may call upon your Name.  
 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; \*  
 show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

It's no wonder  
 that this lament, this song, this prayer  
 was taken up not only by the northerners,  
 but by their relatives in the south,  
 taken up  
 as one of the great prayers of their tradition  
 to be sung in the temple in Jerusalem.  
 Because their prayer  
 was the prayer of anyone  
 who has ever wondered  
 how it is  
 that they believe in a God  
 who cares for them like a shepherd,  
 who cares for them and protects them  
 and makes them feel safe,  
 and yet they experience  
 exactly the opposite.  
 They experience  
 trouble and danger and heartache.  
 Why?  
 Why is it  
 that God doesn't do anything?  
 Why does it almost seem  
 as if God is not only doing nothing,  
 but maybe even  
 acting against them?  
 Why?

And they wonder  
 they wonder, deep down,  
 if perhaps they are kidding themselves.  
 Perhaps this loving, caring, protecting God that they have believed in,  
 this God that they follow  
 is just a figment of their  
 communal imagination.

Perhaps

God is the angry judge.  
 Or perhaps God  
 is not even there at all.

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Restore us, O God of hosts; \*  
 show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.”  
 Restore us, O God of hosts; \*  
 show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.  
 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; \*  
 show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

Just let us see you.

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It's Advent  
 and we are out of step with most of the world around us.  
 But perhaps we're more right  
 that we know.  
 Because for many people  
 the frenetic activity of this season  
 masks something deeper.

It masks a deep fear,  
 a deep questioning,  
 a deep grief  
 about life.

For some of us that is individual.  
 We are afraid of what this holiday season will be like  
 with an absence,  
 whether through death  
 or estrangement  
 or simply distance.  
 One less gift under the tree.  
 One less person around the table.

What do we do? How will we survive?  
 Just let us see you God,  
 just let us see you,  
 and it might, it might

be okay.

And for others of us  
it is communal.

This week  
the news that the grand jury declined to indict Officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of Michael Brown  
was followed by reports of sentries with guns on the roofs of businesses in Ferguson,  
protests across the country,  
a petition of over 120,000 names to the Whitehouse,  
and the resignation of the Officer Darren Wilson,  
who hopes that it will calm tensions in his local community.

Further away  
in western Africa, sixteen thousand people have contracted Ebola. Sixteen thousand.  
Almost half have died.  
And the infection shows no sign of abating.  
Meanwhile, in the affected countries,  
the economies are collapsing  
and people are going without food.

And in Raqqa, the sixth largest city in Syria,  
the self-proclaimed capital of the Islamic State (Isis)  
local people are suffering widespread hunger,  
crippling inflation, chronic power shortages and poverty so acute that emergency soup kitchens  
have been set up.  
And in the center of town  
in Paradise Square,  
there have been beheadings and lashings for offenses as minor as smoking a cigarette  
and crucifixions.

Our world is broken  
and we are broken too.

And this is when we need Advent.  
We need Advent  
not only as a time  
to look forward to Christmas  
that time when we celebrate the light of God  
come into the world in Christ,  
but also that traditional waiting of Advent,  
waiting for the second coming of Christ,

when all things will be judged, and restored, and we will know that new kingdom of God  
where pain and tears are gone,  
where the lion will lie down with the lamb  
and we shall be at peace.

Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;  
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.