

Absence

Prayer: Creator of the world, you are the potter, we are the clay, and you form us in your image. Shape our spirits by Christ's transforming power, that as one people we may live out your compassion, truth, and justice, in the realm of your peace. Amen.

Isaiah 64:1-9

64:1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

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.

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 iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Proclamation of the Word

When preachers tell you their stories we do so in hopes that it might connect you to your story and ultimately to God. So I share this in hopes that you might connect with God's story today.

Do you have photos that just evoke a flood of memories when you see them? I have a favorite Christmas photo from Grandma's house in Greenville. As a child, I thought Christmas Eve the best day of the year. In my favorite photo there is my mother in her black velvet skirt and teased, bouffant hair. My day started with my hair in pink rollers and a bonnet hairdryer. I have on my green velvet dress. I see my four brothers who were forced to come in from outside playing. They have been scrubbed clean, and are painfully wearing dress clothes, of all things...ugh. Then there is Dad who is invisible, always the guy behind the camera.

When I see that one snapshot, a flood of memories come back.

- The year I wore my angel wings to the party...clothes hanger shaped into wings, covered in white panty hose and trimmed with silver shiny garland.
- I remember my older cousins holding court and telling funny jokes. We'd laugh until we wet our pants.
- The annual Christmas phone call to Aunt Eileen and Uncle Bud in New Mexico, and Cousin Thom on the West Coast.

- The best Christmas Eve was when oldest brother Les hitchhiked from Abilene, Texas to South Carolina on leave from the Air Force and surprised us at Christmas. I can still picture his 6'6" frame and those loud, red plaid pants.
- I think about riding home late on Christmas Eve up I-85 and watching for the red light of Rudolph's nose pulling Santa's sleigh. I'd see it in the sky every year. Only later did I realize there was a tall radio tower near Gaffney topped by a red light.
- I remember the year that Grandma, who was on a tight budget and starting to downsize, wrapped up precious things she owned as presents, some of the most meaningful gifts – her brooch, her favorite fishing pole, a special tea cup.

In the midst of all that joy and laughter, pain and human suffering was also present...just unseen most of the time...

- I think of my grandma whose mother committed suicide in the 30's during the Great Depression. Then her little brother, Bud, would take his life the same way after the death of his lifelong companion and wife, Eileen. I remember when the Christmas Eve calls to New Mexico stopped.
- I think of my parents with their brood of boys and little girl, but who carried within them the pain of growing up with alcoholic fathers whose ghosts still haunted us all.
- And then there was brother Les who stopped coming home after he was killed in a motorcycle wreck at age 21.

In the midst of all that joy, all that love, all that excitement, there was the presence of suffering and human pain. It was just mostly hidden. Other times, it was very noticeable.

In the mess of our world like that of Isaiah's world, God appears hidden and absent. God's people seem okay like in my Christmas photo, but there was still pain, folks seemed lost, and the people lament. In a world where God's people have returned from exile, things have changed. God seems distant, uninvolved, or even like God is punishing the people for their sin. And a cry goes out from the prophet, "Get down here right now! Do something God. We have lost sight of you. We want shock and awe."

When I look at the world that God created in hopes of its flourishing, and see the death, sin, and destruction wrought by human hands, I ask "Where are you, God?" I look at the greed, lack of cooperation, and desperation of so many, I want to shout, "Get down here right now. Rip open the heavens and make all things new. Forgive us. Be present with us. Show us might and power and mountains quaking with your presence."

I read that Atlanta, GA is an epicenter of human sex trafficking mostly of international women and children.¹ And whether we call them strangers, aliens, foreigners, as the Bible says, they are God's own children. Child sex trafficking is a 32 billion dollar business. Those who profit from the pain of young women and children being sold into slavery have trespassed and crossed a line. I get angry. I want shock and awe. "Rain down justice. Rain down judgment, O God."

I read in the *Presbyterian Outlook* a letter to the editor from Stephanie in Georgia who as a youth went to her pastor seeking counseling for her sexual abuse. The Protestant pastor took advantage of the situation and

committed similar crimes. She spoke out, was labeled a seductress, and was asked to leave the church. Members protected the pastor and not the young victim. The pastor is still preaching in churches, while she is left with her secret, shame and pain.² I read her letter and want shock and awe. "Get down here right now. Rip open the heavens and make things right, God."

Perhaps you have wrestled with your own sense of God's absence at times. Maybe you have felt that God is absent from the world...like God is taking a vacation when you see the human destruction. We see darkness and long for the light of Jesus Christ to be born again.

Maybe though, like a seed hidden in the ground, God is at work transforming things and bringing new life in ways we cannot see. That is why we mark time in Advent and do not jump right into Christmas Carols. We take our time traveling to Bethlehem, anticipating the birth, hoping for something new. Waiting is not passive, it is active, like a donkey ride and 3 day hike to Bethlehem. We have to make provisions, pack our sacks. We have to pay the bills before we leave and turn off the water so the pipes won't freeze. Taking this journey to worship at a manger takes a lot of preparation.

We already know that Jesus was born, lived, died and was resurrected, but sometimes God seems to have hidden God's face from us.

Sometimes God seems hidden, absent. Or maybe, as Isaiah suggests, we are not present with God. We have lost sight of God. Things appear to only be getting worse.

BUT that is when he comes again. Jesus comes, a second birth, another advent.

When things just seem the worst, he enters into human suffering, into the darkness and brings hope. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus tells of his coming...

Mark 13:24 ff

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.

Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. [Jesus says]

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.'"

In what is called the little apocalypse or revelation, Jesus speaks to God's hiddenness... darkness... absence...stars fall from the heavens, the sun and moon grow dim. And then....

- We see signs of Jesus coming.
- We hold a baby, diaper wet and vulnerable and know a new generation has begun. God has not given up on us yet.
- We find out the medicine is helping and the therapy is working wonders.
- We hear that a tyrant has fallen, and the people rise up against injustice.
- A candle of hope is lit. Hidden grace sheds a little light, like a candle in the darkness.

- Isn't it interesting how the light burns brightest in the dark?

We hear lots of bad news, but into the darkness there comes a star in the East. Into the homeless, traveler's journey, a stable in the back provides shelter. Into the cold of winter, love is born, sprouts arms and legs and runs around. God's own Son, Jesus comes to bring light, and life, and love into the deep brokenness of the world he comes to save.

When God appears most absent, God shows up. God is with us, *Emmanuel*, in Jesus. Now that is PRESENCE, God's presence.

As the famous preacher/author Frederick Buechner writes,

"Strange things happen. Again and again Christ is present not where, as priests, you would be apt to look for him but precisely where you wouldn't have thought to look for him in a thousand years. The great preacher, the sunset, the Mozart Requiem can leave you cold, but the child in the doorway, the rain on the roof, the half-remembered dream, can speak of him and for him with an eloquence that turns your knees to water."

(Buechner in *a Room Called Remember*, p.49)

In the dark night of the soul and into the dark heart of despair, Jesus comes. He comes as a vulnerable child. God's kingdom slips into the cracks of our humanity.

His kingdom comes, but not with shock and awe. It comes in the quietness of the daily and mundane, in Christmas Eve phone calls, brothers returning home, and small thoughtful gifts.

His kingdom comes, not by ripping open the heavens and raining down fire,
but through the dark womb of a young girl and through the
brave, gentleness of Joseph's faith in the angel's message.

God's kingdom comes into the homes of the afflicted and the hearts of the desperate.

Oh, sure we must do our part: stay awake, pay attention, work for healing and peace, light some candles in the darkness, but God's kingdom slips into the cracks of our lives.

This is the good news of the Gospel, not only that Jesus was born into the world of suffering and sin, but that he comes back over and over again into the darkness and brings HOPE.

That is good news we can trust and tuck into the pocket of our hearts, for God is with us, and we call him *Emmanuel*. Let's seek to present to God this Advent as God is already present with us.

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
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¹<http://www.traffickingproject.org/2008/10/human-trafficking-in-atlanta-georgia.html>

²<http://www.pres-outlook.com/opinion/43/12008.html>