

“Where in the World is God?”

Isaiah 64:1-9

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
November 30, 2008

Today, we begin our journey through Advent, a season of anticipation and preparation for Christmas. For the next four weeks, we'll look forward to and prepare for the celebration of Christ's birth on Christmas Day. All our services and programs will be designed with this in mind. I look forward to making this journey with you and appreciate all who will lead us.

About a year ago, I attended a conference led by Old Testament scholar, Dr. Walter Brueggemann, where he talked briefly about Advent. I was struck by his simple yet profound description of the season we embark on today. **“Advent is about God coming out of hiding,”** he said.

He quoted from Matthew 1:23. “The maiden will be with child and give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel, which means, God with us.”

He went on to say that the ancient Israelites did not always consider God to be this accessible and engaged in the affairs of men. Isaiah 64 is a good example of this.

This text reveals a time when people felt God to be aloof and disconnected from their lives. So distant was He that the people had quit praying and seeking His presence.

“No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you, for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins” Isaiah 64:7.

This led Isaiah to become their advocate and plead their case before God. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay and you are the potter. We are the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord. Do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people” Isaiah 64:8-9.

In Brueggemann's words, Isaiah boldly approached God and said, “You call yourself, Father. Well, act like it! Like a loving and responsible parent, enter our world and help us along our journey. Don't be an absentee Father.”

Those were strong words meant to stir the heart of God. They were charged with emotion and delivered with a sense of great urgency. **Why?** Isaiah's countrymen were hurting and needed help.

What did they need God to help them do? They needed His help rebuilding their lives when they returned to Jerusalem after living in Babylon for fifty years.

You recall that many Jews were taken into exile after the Babylonians invaded Judah in 597 and again in 587 B.C. When the Persians overthrew the Babylonians in 539 B.C., Cyrus allowed the deported Israelites to return to Jerusalem and practice their religious observances.

When they returned from their long and difficult exile, however, they were not prepared for what they encountered. Solomon's temple, along with their personal property, lay in ruins. Life as they had known it was gone.

Rebuilding Jerusalem, the temple and their lives would be a daunting task. As a matter of fact, it was too much for them. Their spirits were crushed and their will depleted. Without God's help, they would not succeed, and to this point, their cries for help had fallen on what appeared to be deaf ears. God was silent and they felt abandoned.

They also needed God's help to overcome temptation. They were not treating one another very well. God's absence brought the worst out in them. As Brueggemann said, “When God was hidden, they were destructive.” They could not be gracious neighbors without His help just as they could not rebuild their lives.

With this in mind, Isaiah appeals to God and demands that He be a caring Father. He pleads with God to listen to their cries for help, forgive them of their sins and walk closely with them along their journey.

How did God respond? Our text doesn't tell us. Only Isaiah speaks in this chapter. We do know that the temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem under the direction of Zerubbabel around 515 B.C. This temple stood for almost five hundred years, more than a century longer than Solomon's temple. In addition, under Nehemiah's leadership seventy years later, Jerusalem was reconstructed and repopulated.

This indicates to me that God entered into their struggle and helped them along their journey. This task of rebuilding the temple, their beloved city and their lives could never have been accomplished without divine help.

In the manger in Bethlehem, though, we see God's most vivid response to man's need. "The maiden will be with child and give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel, which means, God with us." The incarnation invites us, in the words of Dr. Colin Harris, "to think about a God who comes to us, as distinct from a God who is 'Wholly Other' and unapproachable."

I believe, however, that Advent is about more than God coming out of hiding. I think it is also about believers coming out of hiding. It is about followers of Jesus being engaged in the lives of those that are struggling. It is about hearing others' pleas for help, walking alongside them on their journey, sharing resources with them, forgiving them for the mistakes they make and helping them rebuild their lives. It is about believers rolling their sleeves up and getting their hands dirty. It is about God's people becoming the presence of Christ in a hurting world by opening their hearts, lives, pocketbooks and homes to those that others turn away.

Who needs your help? Who among you is trying to survive in these tough times or attempting to rebuild his or her life? Who has suffered the death of a mate, failure of a marriage, loss of a job, the devastating effects of an illness or the humiliation of a moral lapse? What will your response be?

Joe and Chris Miller of Platteville, Colorado had a noteworthy response to the cries of pain that they have recently heard. They opened their 600 acre farm seventeen miles north of Denver to anyone that wanted to pick up free vegetables left over after the harvest. They expected 5,000 people would show up to collect free potatoes, carrots and leeks. Instead, over 40,000 came. Traffic was backed up for two miles with people trying to get to the farm. It was estimated that over 600,000 pounds of food was gleaned from the fields.

What do you need to do during Advent to help someone who is struggling? What do you have to offer? Companionship. Encouragement. Advice. Hope. Money. Prayers. Are you offering these?

What would Isaiah say to you today? Perhaps he would say something similar to what he said to God. "You call yourself a believer, well, act like it! Be a loving and responsible neighbor. Enter the world of the hurting and walk beside them on their journey."

Who did this for you? Who entered your world during one of the most difficult times in your life and saved you? Who heard your cries for help and responded? Where would you be today without them?

Come out of hiding during Advent this year. Open your eyes and heart to those around you that are struggling to rebuild their lives and help them. I can think of nothing you can do that would prepare you better for the celebration to come on Christmas Day!

