December 3, 2023 WHERE ARE YOU, GOD?

The first Sunday of Advent calls us to a time of waiting that is filled with anticipation (Hope). The Old Testament lesson for this first Sunday of Advent looks forward to the time when God will intervene and reassert the divine reign on behalf of Judah. This announcement is greeted with anticipation and eagerness by some, with fear and anxiety by others.

The prophet Isaiah makes this contrast quite plain. During the nation's struggle, being exiled from their homeland and thus, the Hebrews believed, from God, the prophet communicated deep, abiding faith in God during a time of uncertainty and travail. He looks to the One who can deliver the people from their oppression. He calls upon God to be their Advocate and intervene against their enemies to bring an end to their misery. The prophet’s prayer also underscores the profound realization of how far the people and nation have strayed.

Isaiah felt deeply the spiritual crisis of his people. He intercedes before God on their behalf. He knew that God was their only hope. Despite the people's sin and separation, Isaiah boldly called on God. He acknowledged the plight of the nation and the people's need for divine intervention. Isaiah's intercession offers a moving contrast between God's power and the bondage of the people. He reveals in his prayer that the way to access divine power is through honest self-examination and confession. In this manner, the coming of the Lord can be greeted with anticipation and eagerness rather than with fear and anxiety.

Only when the people of God can look honestly at themselves do they discover the freedom and power to change. Lack of honesty, prideful self-justification, and attempting to lay blame on others creates barriers rather than removing them. How can people of faith today gain this clarity and self-awareness? Isaiah offers us a direction with the following words: "... no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him" (Isaiah 64:4).

The Hebrew word for "waiting" implies an active waiting rather than a passive waiting. This type of waiting is eager, expectant waiting. Biblical waiting involves steadfast, patient, faithful endurance. Waiting like this gives us the image of being on the edge of our seats, leaning forward, looking with keen interest toward God's next move. We might call this "full-alert" waiting. Waiting involves all our senses, all that we have, and all that we are, our whole being. The goal is to recognize and be responsive to the will of God and the Word of God. The feeling is hopeful. The focus is on God being our Helper, Deliverer, and Guide.

In Isaiah 25:9 we read "When God arrives on the scene with redemptive power, the response of those who have waited will be jubilant joy and great singing” (Those who wait in this manner are blessed and energized by God. In another passage, Isaiah communicated the blessing and energy God gives to those who wait in chapter 40:28-31 “God does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Most of us would love to be renewed. The problem is that we find waiting difficult. We live in an "instant" society. We are used to things such as instant food, instant hot cereal, instant coffee, instant global communication, and overnight package delivery anywhere in the world. We are aware of the dangers of instant gratification and impulse buying but, nevertheless, we are sometimes torn between resisting these things and embracing them. We are often quick to rationalize our actions and slow to carefully assess the implications of our actions. Many pitfalls await us on the road to renewal.

Advent is a good time to begin this journey to renewal. On this first Sunday of Advent, we find ourselves at the start of a new season and the beginning of the Christian year. The word "advent" comes from a Latin word meaning "to come." Advent is a time of waiting and anticipation. But the waiting is difficult, even painful for us. Just ask a child what he or she thinks about waiting until Christmas. At times, waiting can feel like it will take forever! Nevertheless, the value of waiting is immeasurable. If you would like to learn more about Advent, please join us in our worship on Sundays at 11:00 AM.

Peace!

Rev. Dr. Christopher Ponnuraj

Minister