

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, December 3, 2017)

**Texts: Isaiah 64:1-9 and Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19**

*Please note: This Sunday we read the texts as a dramatic presentation reflected below.*

**LITURGIST:** This first Sunday of Advent contains readings that remind us that no matter how hard we may try, God refuses to be held at arm's length from us.

**PASTOR:** As we begin this journey to Bethlehem, where we will affirm and celebrate the coming of God in Christ, how do we deal with the promise that God will do it again, will come again into human time and history?

**LITURGIST:** Hear now these words of Isaiah from chapter 64 verses 1 -9 calling out to God to come and break into the world.

**PASTOR:** Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would shake before you! As fire kindles the brushwood and the fire makes water boil, make your Name known to your adversaries, and let the nations tremble before you!

**LITURGIST:** When you did awesome things that we could not have expected, you came down, and the mountains quaked in your presence!

**PASTOR:** From ages past no ear has ever heard, no eye has ever seen any God but you intervening for those who wait for you!

**LITURGIST:** Oh, that you would find us doing right, that we would be mindful of you in our ways!

**PASTOR:** You are angry because we are sinful; we sinned for so long—how can we be saved?

**LITURGIST:** All of us became unclean and soiled, even our good deeds are polluted.

**PASTOR:** We have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind.

**LITURGIST:** No one calls upon your Name, there is none who clings to you, for you hid your face from us and delivered us into the hands of our sins.

**PASTOR:** Yet you are our mother and father, Yahwh; we are the clay and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hands.

**LITURGIST:** Don't let your anger go beyond measure, O God, don't remember our sins forever, for we are all your people.

**PASTOR:** And from Psalm 80, verses one through seven and seventeen through nineteen, we begin with an almost desperate plea for God to show up and end with the realization that God has always been present.

**LITURGIST:** Eternal Listener, give heed to your people, You, who are our Guide and our Light!

**PASTOR:** You, who dwell amidst the angels, shine forth into the heart of all nations!

**LITURGIST:** Enliven your people with compassion that peace and justice might flourish.

**PASTOR:** Restore us, O Holy One; let your face shine upon us, teach us to love!

**LITURGIST:** Gentle Teacher, help us to turn to You in prayer, fasting from our negative thoughts.

PASTOR: In Your steadfast Love, You weep with our tears, tears that rise from fear, doubt, and illusion.

LITURGIST: You uphold us when we feel the sting of pride, when our anxiety threatens to paralyze us.

PASTOR: Restore us, O Holy One; let your face shine upon us, teach us to love!

LITURGIST: May we always walk and co-create with You; receive the gratitude of our hearts, as we share in the Great Plan!

PASTOR: Restore us, O Holy One! Let your face shine upon us, teach us to love!

Pastor Donald's Reflections: **"Come Again?"**

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

As Advent rolls around each year, the ancient words that guide our faith remind us that for as long as humans have roamed the earth, and, indeed, far longer than that, God has been God and more mysterious and pervasive than any brain could conceive. And, as with each season of Advent, we are reminded that a very real part of our faith is the waiting; hoping that God will continue to work wonders in our lives, the lives of those we love and in the hearts of all God's children.

Even though, in the midst of our waiting we often stray, becoming, as Isaiah puts it, "like one who is unclean" or, even more potently in *The Message*, "like grease-stained rags," fading and deteriorating like crumbled autumn leaves blown away by the wind. Quite the image, yes? I know I've felt like both a grease stained rag as well as crumbled autumn leaves sometimes, how about you? When our hope fades and our anger roars, when we feel there is no God or wonder how, if there is, how such tragedies can happen within our lives and all around us.

I've been thinking a lot about the seasons of our lives and the seasons of the church as we enter Year B of the three-year church cycle for the third time since I became your pastor in 2011. Revisiting these texts I've looked at and studied quite a bit by now, I'm always amazed at what new and wondrous things God wants to show us and how the words continue to live on the page and in our lives each time. Seems like God knew we'd need a way to be reminded again and again of God's mercies, God's love and God's grace. And what better time to be reminded than during this season of wonder as we await again the birth of love and the celebration of the Christ child who shows us the way? "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we might be saved."

"These special holidays give rise to various liturgical calendars that suggest we should mark our days not only with the cycles of the moon and seasons," Brian McLaren writes in his book, "Finding Our Way Again...", "but also with occasions to tell

our children the stories of our faith community's past so that this past will have a future, and so that our ancient way and its practices will be rediscovered and renewed every year."

Because you see, each year we need to be reminded. Each year we need to begin anew. Each year we need to renew our hope. Advent is about waiting and longing and hoping and each year those desires are fulfilled in the Christ child, where our yearning and hoping are rewarded and fulfilled and the cycle begins again. This is the cycle of life, the circle of life, the most amazing and beautiful way God created to keep us from complacency, to help us experience new growth, to enliven, enrich and inspire us. It's up to us to embrace it or just let it pass, allowing the moments pregnant with meaning and expectation to flutter by us like leaves in the wind.

"Like our ancestors in faith, we and all of humankind stand before God in "helplessness and need," commentator James Newsome writes. "Not only are we vulnerable to those forces that may destroy our happiness--indeed, our very existence--but there is little or nothing we, when left to ourselves, are capable of doing about our precarious state. And so the psalm text [we have before us today] utters a simple and primal cry: O God, help!"

I adore the writer Anne Lamott who writes with such grit and truth as she wrestles with the spiritual life in ways that I think most of us can truly relate to. In her latest book, "Help Thanks Wow: The Three Essential Prayers" she reminds us of how much we need that primal cry of, O God, help! "What's the difference between you and God?" she asks, her wit ever razor sharp. "God never think he's you."

"My belief," she says, "is that when you're telling the truth, you're close to God. If you say to God, "I am exhausted and depressed beyond words, and I don't like You at all right now, and I recoil from most people who believe in You," that might be the most honest thing you've ever said. If you told me you had said to God, "It is all hopeless, and I don't have a clue if You exist, but I could use a hand," it would almost bring tears to my eyes, tears of pride in you, for the courage it takes to get real-really real. It would make me want to sit next to you at the dinner table.

"...prayer is our sometimes real selves trying to communicate with the Real, with Truth, with the Light. It is us reaching out to be heard, hoping to be found by a light and warmth in the world, instead of darkness and cold. Even mushrooms respond to light - I suppose they blink their mushroomy eyes, like the rest of us.

"Light reveals us to ourselves, which is not always so great if you find yourself in a big disgusting mess, possibly of your own creation. But like sunflowers we turn toward light. Light warms, and in most cases it draws us to itself. And in this light, we can see beyond our modest receptors, to what is way beyond us, and deep inside."

At our lovely Leap of Faith Bible study session on Wednesday night, we were looking at our Isaiah passage and talking about how people and communities discover

and/or maintain hope when life is not going well or in the midst of a tragedy such as we've heard about pretty ad nauseum in the last years as thousands of people are killed at schools, concerts and even places of worship. Coming together and supporting one another as human and spiritual beings topped the list, and we talked about how much light is so often a part of this coming together. How many times have we watched lighters held aloft and candles being lit as the light is passed from one to another as bit by bit the darkness is conquered and the love and hope generated from so many little lights illuminates the tear stained faces and proclaims again that life and love wins and death and evil will never have victory over us.

"...I pray for people who are hurting," Anne writes, "that they be filled with air and light. Air and light heal; they somehow get into those dark, musty places, like spiritual antibiotics. We don't have to figure out how this all works—"Figure it out" is not a good slogan. It's enough to know it does."

Isaiah's expectation that God will return to shine the light of God's love on God's people is at the heart of the message we hear today as we enter this season of Advent and look towards the ultimate gift God will give us to show all who live that we truly are God's people. In the Christ, we find the definitive present: the assurance that we are God's own in that God sends God's son –God's very self into the world that we might know the fulfillment of that which we dared to long for and expect from the beginning of our creation.

This is what Advent is about. This is where our faith reminds us that even in the darkest hour, our God loves us and shines the light for us. Affirming that God will deliver humanity from its own destruction is one of the most hopeful steps we can take. Having faith that God is truly at work in this world and in the entire universe enables us to see what our part is and can be in bringing about the peaceable kin-dom and helping to establish it here on earth. Wallowing in despair and only seeing life from a hopeless point of view, we affirm the darkness instead of the light and miss the openings available to us to bring about change and to lift others up.

Finally, on this first Sunday of Advent, God, I think, calls us to be present to what is possible; to hope when hope seems hopeless; to dream and envision and expect that what has happened to us, what IS happening to us and what WILL happen to us is all within God's realm and part of what God has and wants for us to experience KNOWING that all things truly work together for those who love God. That's how hope is born again in our lives, knowing that the light is forever shining and beckoning us forward.

A number of years ago, a writer I know by the name of Ray McGinnis came to our church and led a workshop based on his book, "Writing the Psalms." Recently, I found his "An Advent Psalm" published in a book called, "Gifts in Open Hands," and I'd like to offer it to you today.

Blessed is the God of Heaven and Earth  
who gives us the bread of hope  
when we are in despair.  
For too long we have been lulled to sleep,  
our senses numb from fears of war,  
terrorism, pestilence, scarcity,  
global warming, danger lurking everywhere,  
on every newscast, on every TV screen  
and radio call-in show.

Sleepers, awake. Look around and see.  
God is doing a new thing like a spider's web wove in the dark,  
coaxing out the best in us, calling forth people in our midst  
to manifest  
the courage to lead, being the change we seek, showing us  
through small victory after small victory  
the wisdom of compassion  
the strength of listening  
the joy of practicing respect  
the valiance of peace  
the blessing of mercy.

The day is coming  
as a child being born in Bethlehem,  
bringing to birth a new era, a new dawn.  
All you who walk in the land, have faith and live in hope.  
O taste and see that our God is good. Give thanks and praise  
to God who leads us on with stars and angels and carol song.  
O Blessed is the God of Heaven and Earth.

Amen.