

December 3, 2017
First Sunday of Advent

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Worship Fully”

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Prayer of Thanksgiving
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Isaiah 64:1–9

⁶⁴ O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—²as 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! ³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. ⁴From 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. ⁵You 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. ⁶We 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. ⁷There 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. ⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13:24–37

²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷Then 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. ²⁸“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. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

“Worship Fully”
Isaiah 64:1–9, Mark 13:24–37

In a TED Talk she gave two years ago, Monica Lewinsky shared what it was like to be “[the first person to lose a] personal reputation on a global scale almost instantly.” When Lewinsky was twenty-two years old, she fell in love with her boss, who happened to be the president of the United States. In 1998, the story of their relationship was the first major news story that broke, not in newspapers or on television, but on the internet, where it quickly reverberated around the world. Lewinsky refers to 1998 as the year she lost her reputation and her dignity. It was the year she lost almost everything, including her life, when the humiliation and shame directed at her from total strangers sent her into a suicidal depression.¹

Do you know what it’s like to have your world come crashing down? To open your eyes and discover that even though you’re standing right where you were before, nothing around you looks familiar? To experience profound disorientation? Last week, on Wednesday morning, Savannah Guthrie, Matt Lauer’s co-host on the *Today Show*, was visibly shaken as she shared with viewers that Lauer had been fired the night before after NBC received allegations of misconduct against him. After sharing the news of Lauer’s firing, and admitting that she and her colleagues were still processing what had happened, Guthrie said, “All we can say is that we are heartbroken” for both Lauer and for the brave woman who came forward to tell her story. And then she asked a question that a lot of us have been asking ourselves lately: “How do you reconcile your love for someone with the revelation that they behaved badly?”²

Do you know what it’s like to have your world come crashing down? To open your eyes and discover that even though you’re standing right where you were before, nothing around you looks familiar? To experience profound disorientation?

Both of the texts we heard today, from the prophet Isaiah and the gospel of Mark, are directed at people in the midst of profoundly disorienting experiences, who felt like everything safe and familiar had been yanked away. Scholars believe that this portion of Isaiah was written after the Babylonian exile, when some of the Israelites who had endured decades as refugees had

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame

² https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/11/29/arts/29reuters-people-mattlauer.html?_r=0

finally returned to Jerusalem. Of course, what they found there was that things were not as they had left them. Some Israelites had not gone into exile, and relations between the two groups were strained as they tried to sort out how to rebuild the city and the temple and which members of their community should have political and religious authority.³

The thirteenth chapter of Mark's gospel was also written to a disoriented people. In the context of the gospel story, these are Jesus's words to his followers before he started on his final journey to the cross. But in the historical context for which Mark wrote, these words are for late first-century Jews trying to make sense of a political and theological crisis: the destruction of the temple, the sacred place where they gathered to worship God.

This passage is not about Jesus someday coming again to make everything right, it is scripture whose purpose is to help us cope when nothing around us seems to make any sense, when the news keeps going from bad to worse, when we open our eyes and discover that even though we are standing right where we were before, nothing looks familiar. These words of Isaiah and these words of Jesus, are words for times of profound disorientation. They are words for our time, for today, for right here and right now.

In the latter years of his life, my grandfather developed and pursued his artistic talent. He spent hours each day painting, took classes to improve his craft, and spent weekends going to festivals and showing and selling his work. When he died suddenly a week after discovering that he had cancer, our family gathered together in Georgia and my grandmother invited us all to go upstairs to his studio and choose from among the paintings and sketches we found there. I found several paintings that I cherish to this day, but there was something else I found that has meant just as much to me. It was a single sheet of paper, on which someone had typed words spoken by William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944, in a radio broadcast to the United States. This is what it said: *I am disposed to begin by making what many people will feel to be a quite outrageous statement. This world can be saved from political chaos and collapse by one thing only, and that is worship. For to worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, feed the mind with the truth of God, purge the imagination by the beauty of God, open the heart to the love of God, devote the will to the purpose of God.* In the midst of a World War that must have been

³ Corinne Carvalho, commentary on the text at WorkingPreacher.org:
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3485

unimaginably disturbing and disorienting, William Temple believed that the world could be saved by one thing only: *worship*.

The first Sunday of Advent is also the first Sunday of the new church year. And a new year is a time we can choose to reorient or recalibrate. But we are often forced to reorient or recalibrate when tragedies happen, especially those that affect us personally, time often seems to stand still. This is undoubtedly what happened to those first-century Jews when the temple was destroyed. The Temple was the place that contained the presence of God, so what were they to do when that container no longer existed?

Jesus's words here teach us that what we can do when it feels like everything is at risk of falling apart is to **keep watch for the presence of God**. In fact, he says, when everything is falling apart, that is precisely when God is about to show up in a whole new way. "When you see these things taking place – the suffering, the destruction, the disorientation – you know that God is near." And if God is near in the midst of suffering and destruction and disorientation, that must mean God cannot and will not be contained in any temple or sanctuary, no matter how majestic.

In our denomination's governing document, there is a whole section devoted to worship. Here, we find the claim that "Jesus's life discloses the character of authentic Christian worship." We know what worship looks like by looking at Jesus's life. *His whole life*. This section goes on to say, "In daily life, Jesus took ordinary acts of human compassion – healing the sick, feeding the hungry, washing feet – and translated them into ways of serving God. [And so] "in the name of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Christian community worships and serves God in shared experiences of life, in personal discipleship, and in common ministry in the world."⁴

What if this Advent, this new year, we reorient ourselves by redefining worship? What if we allow God to shake us out of the assumption most of us make, whether conscious or not, that worship is what happens for this one hour or so a week when we gather with particular people in a particular place? What if we take Jesus's life and words seriously enough to act as if we can worship in any place with anyone because there is no place God is not and there is no person to whom God does not draw near?

⁴ *The Book of Order 2015-17*, W-1.1003b, W-1.1005b, and W-1.2004a.

God draws near to the woman who is brave enough to tell her story *and* to the man who is her abuser. God draws near to the victims of gun violence *and* to those whose suffering leads them to pick up a gun and pull the trigger. God draws near to those who argue that the tax cut will hurt the poor and vulnerable *and* to the those who believe that more money for corporations and the wealthy will help everyone else as well.

Our church year begins with remembering that in Jesus, God came near to us *all* in a new and totally unexpected way. If this is true, then the worship of God cannot be confined to any time or place or group of people. We can worship God **anywhere** and **everywhere**. We can discover God in **anyone** and **everyone**.

A few weeks ago, Derek and I learned that a colleague and friend had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Last week, he went to the pharmacy to pick up his first round of medication. "The experience," he wrote, "was nothing short of surreal. Weeks of tests, scans, biopsies, waiting, sleepless nights, crying, rallying, oodles of love and support...and it all lead up to a rather mundane, everyday transaction – a guy walking up to a pharmacy counter, giving his name, and being handed a small bag with a bottle of pills inside." To the casual observer, he could have been picking up cough medicine or 1-hour photos. When he was finished the clerk who rang him up said, "Any more questions?" And he said, "Yes. Will you bless this for me?" The split-second look on her face said three things: 1) no one has ever asked me to do this before, 2) yeah, I'll bless it for you – why wouldn't I? and 3) I have absolutely no idea what to do or say to bless a bottle of pills. He held it up over the counter and waited. She paused for a beat, made up her mind, and then did a beautiful, polite bow toward the medicine, and as she did so, she threw in a hand flourish for good measure. He wrote, "It was so sweet, so dear, this impromptu little blessing."

Sometimes, to discover God in everything and everyone, we first have to experience profound disorientation. Our temples – those that give us comfort and security and predictability – have to be destroyed and we will have to endure the discomfort that follows. But when we do, we will discover: We can worship God anywhere and everywhere. We can meet God in anyone and in everyone. It is Advent, and God draws near. Stay awake, keep watch, and may your whole life be worship.

Amen.

Prayer of Thanksgiving
Kevin J. Lowry

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them to the Lord.

Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

God of Advent hope, we give you thanks and joy for who you are, what you've done, and what you promise to do. God of light, since the beginning you shined your light into dark places. Hovering over the darkness of nothing, you spoke light and life into being. From dark soil, you molded and formed us in your image, calling us to love you and care for your world. But we did not trust you. We followed our own way, and turned away from you. Still, you did not give up on us. Though we were unfaithful, you were faithful still.

Each and every day in the ordinary times of our life you call us to faithfulness. You call us to holiness. You call us to love the poor, the orphans, the widows, the oppressed, and the stranger in our midst. You call us to trust you. And so, with all your faithful people, with choirs of angels, in every language of the earth, we sing:

People: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

God of Love and peace, over and over again, you broke into the shadows of our lives and world. You sent servants and prophets to bear light on our darkened paths, guiding us back to your way. Then, out of your great love for the world, you gave us your Son. In Jesus Christ you became for us the Light of the world. Through Jesus, your word became flesh, and dwelt among us. Jesus showed us the way to live and love.

Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, opened blind eyes, broke bread with outcasts, and proclaimed the good news of your upside-down kingdom where the first are last and the last are first. On the cross, Jesus gave himself for the life of the world.

God of Joy and Sorrow, as we live our lives we encounter you, revealed to us through the many people we come across each and every day. It is when we are connected to each other that we can discover you in our midst.

Abba, Bless this bread and this cup so that it may feed all who are hungry and thirst for your love and that this meal may provide us new life.

As we start this journey of advent we pray for all those in our congregation and larger community. We pray for those who are sick, homebound, and alone. We pray for our student community as they move into finals and complete their semester. We pray for all those in our neighborhood to are seeking to see your face.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours, almighty God, now and forever. With the confidence of the children of God, let us pray together the prayer your Son taught saying: **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever.**