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December 3, 2017 – Advent 1
Psalm 80; Isaiah 64:1-9

As Cynthia named earlier, today we officially begin our journey through Advent. During this liturgical season of the church we ponder once again the great mystery of the incarnation when God came near to us in the form of a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. At the same time we also remember our calling to expectantly wait for the return of Jesus. Throughout this particular Advent each Sunday will echo part of Mary's prayer in Luke chapter 1 verse 38, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Yes! Let it be! However, perhaps this sounds too meek and mild to fully articulate the intention of the Greek words employed. So, another option offered is "Bring it on, God!" Either thematic statement expresses our prayerful desire to participate in God's activity this Advent season.

Today's theme is "Let it be" as we awaken to God's purpose, which begins in darkness – whether seed in the ground, child in the womb, or new self in the soul. The two lectionary texts both beseech God to come near, to shine the light, and to be active in our midst. Within the texts we also hear the vivid imagery of our God as Shepherd, Gardener, Divine Warrior, Lord, Divine Parent, and Potter. In both passages the writers are recognizing the ways their world and contexts are filled with darkness and therefore are in need of God's face to shine the light and hope of God.

We begin with Psalm 80. This psalm is a psalm of communal lament although it is "vague as to what crisis may have originally precipitated the plea. Perhaps it was the Babylonian exile... This is not clear, (however) the surrounding doubt is actually a positive--it allows the prayer to be sung by any community undergoing crisis, or even by a thriving community (offering it) on behalf of others who are suffering."¹

So to begin with I think it is appropriate for us to pause and consider where in our lives – both within community and as individuals – where are we experiencing areas of darkness or suffering? If I were to invite you to name it, what would you name as something you need to lament today? Friends, this is not news to you, but there is **much** to be lamented. There is brokenness, suffering, fear, and pain right here within households of our faith community. We often do a great job of masking reality and putting on our masks to come to church, whether out of pride or out of necessity... and yet beneath the brittle veneer there is darkness and suffering. It would not take long for each of us to consider someone within our small circle of friends and family who are experiencing an aspect of darkness around them. Perhaps it is crisis related to their health, finances, employment, relationships, or life direction. I am confident that in each of our lives we know people, and perhaps it is ourselves, who are experiencing the invasive darkness and could easily join in with the psalmist passionately praying this prayer of lament.

However, this psalm is a prayer of lament for the community. While individuals over the years have also employed these words for a personal lament, it was written to express the collective voice, collective prayer, and collective heaviness of lament of the gathered body. So then I wondered this week, what are things that together we lament, that together we name as the pain and brokenness of the world around us? So if our passages are asking God to come with God's light, what would be the areas of darkness that we would list as a catalyst for praying this lament? What do you name? When you allow yourself to fully enter into an area of darkness, and perhaps even that darkness overwhelms you, what is the cause of that darkness? For what do we name as things to corporately lament? (allow time for things to be named) I name racism and the devaluing of other humans. I name the rise of mass shootings that leave the entire country in a state of trauma and fear. I name the prevalence of opioids drugs whose addictions are destroying

families and communities. I name the potential ICE detention center in our own backyard. I name the deforestation of God's beloved creation and the dumping of toxins into clean drinking water. I name the unrest in the Congo, Syria, Zimbabwe, North Korea. I name hatred, crippling fear, destructive and demoralizing violence. I name the tech world that has our young people withdrawing to the underground world of relationships, and yet forcing them to keep up with their projected identity 24 hours a day 365 days a year. I name the right of women coming forward and disclosing that they have been sexually harassed or abused in churches, homes, and work places. The list could go on. Darkness, pain, brokenness.

The shopping stores want us to enter this season of Advent and embrace the joy of materialism as we prepare to celebrate Christmas. The broader culture tries to inform us that tis the season to be jolly, and life is rosy, and all people everywhere are counting down the days with gleeful anticipation for large family gatherings where everything will go perfectly. And perhaps if we are honest a part of us also longs for these things. And yet on the other hand we sit and absorb the reality that there is still darkness – within ourselves, in our friends and loved ones, and in this world we call home.

It is within this honest recognition that we join the psalmist in praying - hear us Shepherd, come and save us. Restore us. The psalm also builds in momentum and intensity. First it's O God, and then God Almighty, and then Lord God Almighty. "This building up of intensity has the effect of turning up the volume on and urgency of the people's desperate cry for help."ⁱⁱ As the intensity is increased the psalmist continues to utilize vivid images including the image of drinking tears by the bowlful. "In advent, (we join the psalmist as) we confess the world remains undone; the world remains a place that leaves people drinking tears by the bowlful and in need of the advent of God."ⁱⁱⁱ Within the images of the psalm the psalmist reminds God that God has

been the one who has tended them, sustained them, and cared for them as they were a vine from Egypt that was gently transplanted. It is as if the Psalmist is reminding God of God's faithful, loving actions. Remember God, you have restored us in the past. You have taken us from the place of darkness and shined your face on us providing us light and direction. Remember, you love us.

Throughout the psalm there is a repeated refrain found in verses 3, 7, and 19. "Restore us, O God, make your face shine on us, that we may be saved." Old Testament Scholar Rolf Jacobson explains that "the plea that God "let your face shine" is plea for God's favor to radiate on the people, like the sun bathes the earth in light. In the psalms, God's disfavor is often pictured as God hiding God's face, or turning away from the community.... (we) are familiar with the words of the benediction: "May God's face shine on you". The plea here is a prayer for the very thing that is promised in the benediction: God's face shining forth in deliverance and blessing."^{iv} The prayer asks for God to continue to look in our direction, to see us, to see the darkness that is within and without, and asking that God would restore us by God's light.

Every morning I sing "Yonder come day" to my children as I wake them up. "Yonder come day, day is a breaking, yonder come day oh my soul, yonder come day, day is a breaking, sun is arising in my soul." For me it is an act of daily embodiment of this psalm. As I sing this song it helps to keep me grounded that it is a new day for my body, mind and soul, and that God's sun, God's light, is arising in my soul. God's light is here, each and every morning, seeping into the areas of darkness within and without. *Each day I strive to focus on God's light reaching into the darkness, instead of focusing on the darkness that is threatening the light.*

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah also offers a communal lament in Isaiah chapter 64. Here too we receive a picture that is vividly painted of God coming down that causes the

mountains to tremble, and a fire to rage, and water to boil, and nations to quake before God.

Author Kristin Wenland points us that “The metaphors used to describe the coming of God -- a pot of water boiling over and mountains shaking -- are not terribly comforting. Boiling water scalds. It cannot be put back into the pot. Shaking mountains may crumble and reduce the environment to chaos... Despite the known danger of facing the LORD, or perhaps because of it, the people in Isaiah 64:1-9 call for God to come near. They are in need of divine help.”^v

Like the psalmist, Isaiah reminds God that God has been faithful in the past carrying out awesome unexpected deeds. Remember God we have a rich history together. You have been here in the past and now amidst our darkness and pain we need you to come again. God we need you to arrive in new ways, to be birthed anew, to pray for your advent, your coming near, to transform our reality by the light of your face. And again this is a communal lament, a communal voice very appropriate for us to embody at the beginning of our advent journey.

Throughout this passage in Isaiah there is a repeated phrase of “all of us.” In the English translation is gets a little lost and the redundancy of the Hebrew does not come through. In the Hebrew it would be “We are like one unclean -- all of us (vs. 6a). We drooped like a leaf -- all of us (vs. 6b). We are the work of your hand -- all of us (vs.8). Consider, we are your people -- all of us (vs. 9). This four-fold emphasis on the totality of the people -- all of us -- reminds us that we as humans are in this together and we -- all of us -- belong to God.”^{vi}

I find great comfort in recognizing the communal-ness of our laments, even our personal laments. Joining our voices together helps to declare to each other - you are not in this alone. I sit in the darkness with you. Together our voices can blend and merge to pray for God’s light to be revealed. *All of us need God*. It also joins our voices in acknowledging that we each have sinned and are in need of God’s salvation. All of us.

At the beginning of Advent we must acknowledge yet again that we are not in control and to confess our sin of believing or acting like we are. This sin bleeds over to our attempt to put God and God's power in a box either out of disbelief or doubt, or out of a convoluted overzealous self-image that reduces our need for God. For instance, how often do we even bypass Isaiah and the psalmist and not even call out to God to come and restore us, to come and shine God's face on us? How often instead do we by our words or actions communicate to God, "It's okay God, I got this. You go on doing whatever it is that you do, and I will handle this." How often have we forgotten which one of us in the relationship is the Almighty God? How often have we entered December and gotten sucked into the hoopla of Christmas that has blinded us to the celebration of Jesus' advent that Christmas morn? Or how often have we been unaware of our need for Jesus' ongoing advent and arrival in our world today? How often are we praying the prayer of lament, and the plea for action, to *ourselves*, and not calling upon God to come and save us?

Prayers of lament are prayers of faith in God that God will continue to listen and respond. Most prayers of lament include aspects of hope, and this prayer of lament in Isaiah does as well. This prayer also ends with a reorienting of who is who in this relationship. Read with me in verse 8 – "and yet you, Lord, are our Parent. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." "God not only has the power to mold us...but actually wants to mold us. In fact, God wants to mold us in the divine image and likeness, a reality made clear when God molds the divine self on Christmas day as an impoverished, displaced infant. God becomes the clay."^{vii} In a similar manner, it is significant to be reminded this season of advent, this season of praying for God's coming among us and waiting for God's face to shine new light in our experiences of

darkness, that we are each sacred clay. Sacred clay loved and cherished by the potter, the one who is molding us and fashioning us in the divine image. All of us.

As sacred clay we are to cry out to God and ask God to use us to help carry out God's mission in the world. We do not create the light that shines in the darkness, however, we are called to be bearers of that light. We are called to join God in helping to dispel the darkness. We are called to remember that we are sacred clay, and that we serve and worship the potter. This season of advent may we cry out to God from the areas of darkness, asking and trusting that God will be present shining a light. May we join Mary's prayer to "let it be" as we declare to God our desire to be fashioned by God into a vessel that bears and shines God's light in a world of darkness. All of us.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Rolf Jacobson, *Commentary on Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19*,

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=188

ⁱⁱ Jacobson, *Commentary on Psalm 80*.

ⁱⁱⁱ W. Dennis Tucker, JR, *Commentary on Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19*,

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1092

^{iv} Jacobson, *Commentary on Psalm 80*.

^v Kristen Wendland, *Commentary on Isaiah 64:1-9*,

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2253

^{vi} Wendland, *Commentary on Isaiah 64:1-9*.

^{vii} Corrine Carvalho, *Commentary on Isaiah 64:1-9*

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3485