

AWAITING YOU

December 17th, 2017 by Pilar Millhollen

Readings: "Like A Star" by Galen Guengerich; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

In the Sunday school room at Middle Collegiate Church hangs a gorgeous tapestry with bold sweeping colors that tell the story of God's creation of the world from Genesis. Painted by an artist in the congregation, each square, like a quilt, features a watercolor image with paraphrased quotes around the borders about God's lavish work. But I always noticed the first couple of squares more than any others. They feature lightness and darkness, swirling together, sun and moon working with each other as God forms the cosmos. They read something like this: "And God stepped out on space. And she looked around and said, "I'm lonely - I'll make me a world." The following squares portray the earth within the cosmos and gorgeous creations of waterfalls, eagles, horses, mountain tops and coastlines, with Adam and Eve in all their brown-skinned beauty standing to look out with joy at the marvelous work that God shouts is "very good," but I always loved that first scene because it said something that always seemed so clear but never has been so popular: God was alone, and so God decided to create a world.

I remember when I first heard the song "Awaiting You" that Jordan just sang...I remember hearing this song and thinking, I don't know if I understand this, but I know what it feels like. To look around and see things happening that you think are not supposed to happen, and waiting to see God in it. To one moment, feeling the presence of such divine goodness, and the next to suffer a loss that makes you go, maybe you're not here, maybe I'm still waiting for you to show up. But what felt more foreign to me was the lyric that proclaimed that God is awaiting the singer: "Shining in the eyes of every child/and in the flame of dawn reflecting on the open sea/in every fury and every love/*you* are awaiting *me*." I didn't quite get this until I started really reading the Bible. Truly. Because somehow in our traditions, we've shied away from the truth that God is also waiting for us. This passage from Isaiah 61, which has such a specific meaning for Christians since Jesus used it to declare his public ministry, has a different meaning in light of its original context. Between our text from last week where Isaiah promised the soon-coming return from exile and where we end up this week, declaring the year of the Lord's favor, the story takes twists and turns in a drama of moral failings and redemption, but contains an unrelenting emphasis on Israel's unique potential to bring light to a world in great pain. But what I found this time, that I had missed in prior readings of this epic story, was a new kind of partnership between God and the people. So for centuries we've had this theological argument going on in Jewish and Christian tradition about how much God needs people, or for that matter, if God needs people at all. From the more orthodox perspective, a clear case is argued that if God is sovereign, so totally in charge, and if God is transcendent, so beyond the realm of physical and immediate reality, then that's proof that God has no external needs. God stands alone, which separate and greater than humans. Unlike humans, God has no vulnerabilities. And this makes a lot of sense...except for the fact that the God of our scriptures is profoundly relational. While both testaments describe God's creative power in ways that we humans could never imitate, we also can't pretend that the stories in this book are anything other than about God's relationship to humanity. From the Genesis creation story of God's beloved first people to Moses' call on Horeb to Jesus' ministry of reconciliation, we are confronted by a God who desires so much to be with us, and we have responded as a people always reaching back out toward God. And why wouldn't we? Why

would God have any reason to create this world – in all its pain but all its glory - and then stand aside and leave us alone?

Perhaps God simply made the choice to be in relationship with us, a choice that could have gone the other way. But I wonder, when reading this magnificent text in Isaiah, this thesis text for who God wants us to be, I wonder if God found that the creation – which as Genesis tells us, was very good, actually changed God's needs?

Like any journey toward wholeness, return from exile proved much more difficult than the Israelites had hoped, and according to Isaiah the people in their hardship forgot who they were and returned to a state of callousness, greed, and idolatry - thus forsaking the God of good news. But God would not let this go. Leading up to chapter 61, Isaiah often speaks as God in the first person, chasing after the people even though they have turned away; "you have burdened me with your sins," God laments, "you have wearied me with your iniquities." This a grieving deity, the tables have turned - where once the people had long awaited divine deliverance, now it is the Divine One who pursues, who laments and who desires to see justice enacted upon the earth through a chosen people. The prophet introduces the character of an unnamed suffering servant, which Jewish Talmudic tradition has sometimes attributed to Moses and Christian theology has interpreted as proof of a coming messiah who would permanently deliver the world from violence to restore God's reign on earth. For Christians, this prophecy aligns beautifully with Jesus' ministry and is a continued source of strength and affirmation of that coming figure who would save humanity. But there is a missing element here: for perhaps there's even more power in the text's meaning for its original audience in the diaspora, for the suffering servant is called Jacob and Israel, and more accurately represents that whole nation of people. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights," God proclaims, who "will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth." God goes on to name Israel, in spite of its flaws, in spite of its bad behavior, as a light to all the nations. Consider the implications for a moment: rather than one or two or a few leaders that will guide the many into right living, God is waiting on an entire people to be an example to the world. And that people God chooses have suffered centuries of collective trauma, a people who are, in essence, underdogs. Forget the decorated kings of Assyria and Babylon, God chooses to stake claim on the beleaguered nation of Israel. This is a weighty declaration, and here's why: because by choosing a people who know what it is to hurt, God is lifting up an emphasis on empathy – that only through identification with the suffering of others can a society make conscious and moral choices. It is such that the God of Israel proclaims this unlikely nation to be the one chosen to show the world what a more just, a more peaceful, a more compassionate society looks like. By the time we get to our passage for this morning, God has laid into Israel and its neighboring nations like an angry parent who cannot understand why the children do not learn from their mistakes, why they allow their suffering to turn their hearts against their neighbor; and yet with each lamentation, God reiterates, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the end of the earth...my steadfast love shall not depart from you...with everlasting love, I will have compassion on you." Hey, you who have suffered, God's saying, you are the ones to help end the suffering of others. You, who have been broken, are the ones called to repair the brokenness of the world. Like the covenants of old, God promises a new covenant, charging Israel with the task of calling all the nations into right living through their distinct experience of their own marginalization, which is to become that powerful tool that we know as empathy.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me;" Isaiah's words proclaim. What if we shifted gears on this away from the individual and toward the collective? What if we really listened to the text calling to us, as a whole people, to be the light of the world? What if in every fury and every love, God is also awaiting *you*? I know it's scary, but what if we embraced the dark nights in each of us, the unique histories of individual pain, of cultural oppression, of personal loss and shame and collective grief, that each of these experiences that live within us are actually holy? That each of these experiences is holy because they give us the wherewithal to bring good news to the oppressed because of our own oppression or our own awakening to how we have oppressed; to bind up the brokenhearted because our hearts too have been broken, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners because we have been or have loved ones who have been imprisoned by the state or by internalized forces of evil that whisper to us that we are unworthy; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, the Jubilee Year where debts are forgiven and the dispossessed return to their own land, because we have felt the sting of unpaid bills and the struggle of displacement. Dennis Bratcher puts it this way: "The role of a delivered people is to be a channel from God to the hurting, oppressed, hopeless people of the world." UU minister Galen Guengerich, in our first reading, also reflects that "no matter how difficult the past may have been, nor how dire the present may seem to be, something more is possible – something more loving, something more merciful, something more peaceful." But I believe in a caveat here: we cannot put on someone else's oxygen mask until we've put on our own oxygen masks. We cannot build up the ancient ruins and raise up the former devastations without first acknowledging what has been devastated within each of us. It is only through our own dark nights of the soul, that doubt, that experience of *not* seeing but *awaiting* that *something more*, that *deliverance*, that sense of prevailing goodness, that we have the capacity to be as a light to the world.

In this our third week of Advent and first week of Hanukkah, we light these candles of faith for many reasons, and with many representations. What if we included ourselves in these symbols? What if in the flames we see both the hope of a coming messiah and the promise of our own ability to bring the messianic vision to earth? What if, perhaps, we imitated divine grace by giving ourselves a portion of that grace for the moments in this busy season we think we have failed, for the wounds that still feel fresh, for the darkness within us that we want so much to go away? What if in these flames, we affirm the remembrance of God's miracle when goodness prevailed over evil in spite of grand opposition and the current miracles that we usher in when as a people we repudiate the forces of white supremacy and individualism? What if in that candle we seek God's presence calling out to us, saying, "Hey, I'm here and I need you too. I'm always reaching out for you, hoping that you'll hear me, that you'll use everything that you've experienced and embrace everything that you are – wounds and all – for the healing of the world." If you reach back out, maybe you'll find that the spirit of the Lord God is upon *you*, for the Lord God has anointed *you*. So keep bringing the light that shines from within you, even if it feels like only a sliver here, a glimpse there, because in the endless work of dismantling oppressions, repairing what is broken, freeing those imprisoned, you may find that you are healing yourself. That shining in the eyes of every child, and in the flame of dawn reflecting on the open sea, in every fury and every love, God will still be standing there, awaiting you.