

Where Are You, Very Big God?

Sometimes it takes a crisis for people to remember our need for God.

That's what's behind the saying, "There are no atheists in foxholes." When a soldier's life is immediately threatened, when the bullets are flying and the target is the young person hoping that the ditch he's dug will be enough protection, even if he's never been a believer before, it can't hurt to say a prayer for survival. Or in the emergency room, on the edge of life and death, a hospital chaplain's presence and prayer are rarely turned away. Or facing a big exam, an otherwise questioning student might ask for divine assistance. In the moment of crisis, we think, maybe God will help. One can only hope.

But what happens when the crisis goes the wrong way? Is God to blame? Many have returned from war with their earlier faith in tatters. Many have become bitter when life shattered their hopes and dreams. Some conclude that God is a cruel God, or God wasn't there for them, or God never was.

The crisis we are living through is a weird one. There aren't bullets in the air. Many are getting sick, but most of those aren't dying. In our local community, social support networks are mostly keeping up with economic hardships. But life is disrupted in weird ways. Our faith is challenged in ways we've never experienced before. So I conclude: this is a time to remember our need for God. This is a time to go deeper in our search for understanding of who God is and how God works in the world. This is a time to call upon God and hold onto hope.

"O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" the people lamented, more than 2500 years ago. What we have received as the book of Isaiah is a collection that spans over 200 years of history. Today's text is from the third portion of that span, reflecting 200 years of disruption, disorientation, and distress. First the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. Then the southern kingdom of Judah, including the holy city of Jerusalem and its Temple, fell to the Babylonians. And then, when the people of Israel were scattered and in exile, the Babylonians lost out to the Persians. None of this history was the way they expected things to happen. Nothing felt like their understanding of what it meant to be the people of the almighty God who tore open the heavens and came down to Mt. Sinai to give the Law. Where, the people lamented, where was their Very Big God who had chosen them for blessing, chosen them to be God's Very Own People?

It was a 200-year-long crisis. We've been in this one for only nine months. Will we keep our faith for as long as this lasts?

If ever you thought the Bible was a book filled with exemplary people with unshakable faith whose relationship with God was always good, people so unlike you that you couldn't relate to them, well, I hope you are learning that the people of the Bible were flawed people with shaky faith who frequently were at odds with God! In other words, very much like you and me!

But with the help of prophets like Isaiah, in times of crisis they remembered God and they remembered God's faithfulness. They remembered that God had come down and blessed them with a law and a land. They remembered that God had done awesome and unexpected deeds. They remembered that God had worked for those who waited for him, God had been there for them in times of trouble, and God was still their parent, their maker, their molders, their God.

The laments of the Hebrew people are founded on faith. They are honest expressions of need, unfiltered expressions of exasperation, heartfelt expressions of longing and anger, grief and despair reaching out for hope. Where are you, our Very Big God? We remember you—do you remember us? We have sinned. But still, we are all your people.

Amid the strangeness of 2020, the rhythms of the church year provide something predictable. Right after our national holiday of Thanksgiving, Advent begins. We start our family rituals at home—the tree, the cookies, the gift lists. We decorate the church, and we listen to these scripture passages which speak of our longing for God to be with us. In these days of waning light, we light a candle of Hope, a light in the darkness, a candle of promise. The traditions and rituals are important. We will miss some of these this year. They give us the predictability which we need. We grieve that Christmas will not be the same. But let me suggest that this year's disruptions give us an opportunity to call it quits to some tired or unhealthy habits: excess spending on things that provide only a few moments of pleasure, overindulgence in food and drink, the annual family fight. I suggest that this year we not rush into Christmas giddiness, but instead linger in the Advent themes. This year's crisis reminds us that our world is still longing for God's presence, still hoping for God's intervention, still waiting for the fullness of God's peace to be with us.

Even as we look toward Christmas, we're still hoping for a Very Big God to do a Very Big Action. Eradicate this virus, or at least give us a powerful vaccine so we can eradicate it ourselves. Clean up the mess in Washington. Control climate change. End world hunger. Bring world peace. But we know that these very big goals consist of many, many, many small efforts, many, many, many small people each contributing their many, many, many small parts. And that line in the middle of today's reading calls us to do our part with patience, for it reminds us, "God works for those who wait for him." (Is 64:4) Advent is a time for unlearning our desire for instant gratification while aligning ourselves with God's purposes. Advent is a season of discipline, in which our hope learns what watchful, active waiting means.

And Advent is a time to remember one of the fundamental insights of the Christian faith, that our Very Big God comes to us in very small ways. Instead of restoring all the people of Israel to their land, they returned by dribs and drabs to find that though it was still home, almost everything had changed. Instead of rebuilding the Temple in short order, it took decades to restore. And more than 500 years later, instead of sending a great hero to raise an army of God's people to overthrow the occupying Romans, God sent a child born in obscurity and recognized only by shepherds and farm animals and his peasant parents as the light of the world.

Writer Debie Thomas says it this way.

When I come to God in prayer, dreaming of a just and wholly redeemed world, I know I'm dreaming a tiny version of God's own dream. But during Advent, I am asked to prepare myself for something else. *Someone* else. Someone so unexpected and so small, I'm tempted to either laugh or cry at the thought of him. The world is falling apart, my heart is exhausted, people are dying, and God chooses to send me ... *a baby?*

("Because You Hid Yourself," www.journeywithjesus.net, 11/22/2020)

Our Very Big God chooses to act in many, many, many very small ways, ways which surprise us. And awaken awe in us. And challenge us, include us, and enlist us.

All of which depends on us keeping faith in our faithful God. Trusting in the hope implanted in us by our hopeful God. Believing in the story of a savior born in a manger, hung on a tree, and raised to new life in a garden by the quiet power of our living God. Who works for those who wait for him.

My friends, in the foxholes of these days, keep on praying. Pray for the saving of the world, the saving of those you love, and the strengthening of your faith. Pray that this time of trial and waiting would be a time of growth, deepening your understanding of God and God's ways. Pray that hope in Christ will help you see the light at the end of the tunnel, the light of Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

I close with this advent poem written by poet Pamela Cranston. It is based on a theme by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spent two Advents in prison before his execution by the Nazis.

guilty as a prisoner.

As you can imagine,
it sang and whistled in the dark.
It hoped. It paced and pattered about,
tidying its little piles of inconsequence.

It wept from the weight of ennui
draped like shackles on its wrists.
It raged and wailed against the walls
of its own plight.

But there was nothing
the world could do
to find its freedom.
The door was shut tight.

It could only be opened
from the outside.
Who could believe the latch
would be turned by the flower
of a newborn hand?

(in *Searching for Nova Albion*, 2019, Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR, p. 87)

May we believe, and hope, and pray together for the presence of our Very Big God's small hand opening the door between heaven and earth.