

“Hide and Seek”

Isaiah 64 & Psalm 80 Advent I

Gordon Wiersma 12/27/11

You've probably heard of the idea of a presence of an absence? A situation in which some one or thing NOT being present is felt in a tangible way – the absence itself has a place, is a presence. Whether or not we've given it that name, that term – the 'presence of an absence' – it's something we all feel in ways smaller or greater. During these holiday times – as people gather, or not; as someone is present or not; as someone is separated by distance or death or circumstance – in the midst of all that is present, there can be an absence felt as well. It's what makes the season we have embarked upon such a tender or even troublesome time for many folks – and in some way for all of us – not the cheeriest holiday tone to set today...the presence of an absence.

But the Isaiah & Psalm passages set that somber tone for us – they are all about the absence of God. When the prophet cries out: 'O that you would tear open the heavens...' – that is a literal image going on there: an idea of physical space in which the sky is a boundary beyond which God abides – and the plea is literally for God to rip open this barrier and come...and that is the plea because God is not present.

When the Psalmist says ‘shine on us and restore us...’ it is not about turning to a radiant presence of God – it is a yearning for the light of God to be present, to shine, because there is no light, no presence. And unlike some passages in which this plea moves into resolution and restoration, that doesn’t happen here – the absence remains throughout.

Well that is a daunting presence – the absence of God. Is that what Advent is about – a season of absence? Is Advent about pointing to the presence of God or feeling the absence? We would certainly want the presence of God – but we need at least to do what these texts are willing to do: to abide for a time with the absence. And my sense is that talk with folks around us and there would be plenty to hear about the absence of God. In the midst of suffering, people express ‘where is God?’ – ‘God has abandoned me’; people have doubt about God – a sense of disconnect or distance; and perhaps even in indifference to God – plenty of that as well – is the presence of an absence felt there too? Do you, I, feel God’s absence ever, often, sometimes? I imagine that all of us do at times. Times of doubt – seasons of suffering – a sense of disconnect...even a wondering day to day of what it means for

God to be with you. We and our world are familiar with the presence of the absence...

So, we've all played hide & seek, right? Whether recently or a long time ago... Hide and seek spans the generations – it's fun to hide and seek; maybe the hiding is the favorite...but it's kind of exciting to be found too – a game for everyone. Is faith in God a game of hide and seek? Is God hidden and we have to find God – is that the game? Or are we the ones hiding and God has to find us...and do we want to be found? (that's something to think about) – is that the game? Well I'm not sure if hide and seek is the best image to use, and I do know that life is not a game. But that hide and seek image does seem to play with these texts in conveying to us that there is both absence and presence – both hiddenness and seeking with God – perhaps in God and in us? These texts start us into an Advent season by telling us that to speak of the absence of God can be an act of faith. We join in seeking God – crying out for presence; we join in remembering – believing that God's faithfulness in the past is our truth today; we join in repenting – knowing that our lives can separate us from God as well.

That's why it seems most profound that we would celebrate both sacraments on this 1st Sunday of Advent. Baptism and communion in some sense both confess our need to reach out to a God who is hidden, absent from us; and at the same time they are a profession faith that in the very stuff of life – of water and bread & cup; of people and relationships and commitments and community – that there God is present, revealed.

The truth Advent leads to as well is that our faith is in fact a stunningly 'God is present' faith – we journey to once again take in the marvel of incarnation – God with us in/through Jesus Christ...ours is a faith of stunning truth: God seeks and is with us. But still...the church is still a people of faith in what is not always seen – God can still feel hidden in life, in world – there is a time to feel the absence and long for God's presence. This is a place for a faith that cries out also in the absence...that remembers – that seeks – and that does find nourishment: the presence of God for us – to send us to a world that longs for the same. O Lord, let your face shine. Amen.