

“A Good Cry”

Is. 40:1-11, II Peter 3:8-15, Mark 1:1-8

Advent II, Dec. 4, 2011

Hope Church

Lynn Japinga

Intro to OT: This fall we have heard many stories about the Israelites waiting to enter their land. Many years have passed, they have taken the land, and become a powerful nation. But their politicians grew corrupt, and the people did not keep their covenant with God. In the first 39 chapters of this book, Isaiah chastised the Israelites for their unfaithfulness to God. Around 600 BC, the nation of Israel was defeated by the nation of Babylon and many of the Israelites were taken away to Babylon and forced to live there in exile. They were devastated, and they felt deeply ashamed of themselves for failing to live as God’s people. But beginning in chapter 40, and for the rest of the book of Isaiah, the tone radically changes from despair to hope. God is going to do a new thing for the people of Israel.

In my day job as a college professor, I’ve been spending a lot of time in the last two weeks reading senior seminar papers. Students are telling their life stories and thinking about how they got to be who they are. Some of them have lived pretty charmed lives. They speak of loving families, encouragement, opportunities, grandparents, good teachers, inspiring youth groups. It is easy for them to see how God has been present in their lives. Other students have much more complicated stories. They wrestle with abuse, addictions, mental illness, and cancer. For these students it can be very difficult to see the presence of God in the midst of so much brokenness.

Sarah’s mom died of cancer when Sarah was 3. Her older sister died in an accident when Sarah was 10. Her dad died of cancer when Sarah was 12. In the decade since, Sarah has lived with severe depression, a difficult relationship with her step-mother, and a recent diagnosis of fibromyalgia. That seems like far too much pain for one person. Where is God in all of that? Where is grace and healing and transformation?

The texts for today are from different periods in Jewish and Christian history, and they are wrestling with that question too. Where is God?

The exiled Israelites believed that God had abandoned them as punishment for their sins. They were broken and discouraged. But in the midst of all that despair came this powerful new word. Comfort. The Israelites had suffered enough. Yes, they had been weak. They had been like grass that turns brown and dies, or like flowers that fade. But it was time for them to hear good news. “Here is your God!”

And what does this God look like? God is not absent or powerless, as the people had feared. God is mighty and God rules. That was good news to people in exile. God would tear open the heavens and come down! God would intervene. God would get them out of Babylon and back home to Jerusalem. Here is your God! Powerful. In control. A bit scary, this God.

But there is more to God than that. The next sentence says that God is like a shepherd. God will gather up the lambs and carry them, and gently lead the mother sheep. Here is your God! Tender, compassionate. Like a mother, we might say. But more accurately, like a loving parent of either gender.

About 500 years later. The Israelites were back in their land, but it was not really theirs because the Romans were in control. The Israelites want God to intervene. They are waiting for a Messiah -- a king, a powerful ruler to overthrow the Romans and give the land back to the Israelites. And Mark’s gospel says, Here is your Messiah! Jesus ... the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

But Mark doesn’t proceed to introduce a powerful new king. Instead, he introduces this voice crying in the wilderness. John the Baptist was kind of a strange dude

... what with the camel's hair clothing and the diet of locusts and honey. But his message was even stranger. He didn't talk about overthrowing the government. He didn't talk about power. Instead, he talked about repentance and forgiveness of sins. Was that good news? Where was God?

100 years later. It is long after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. We've read a number of texts in the last few weeks which talk about the return of Jesus. Last week's Gospel said, "Keep awake!" because Jesus will come back soon. But a lot of years went by, and Jesus did not return. Where was God? The cynics and the skeptics ridiculed the idea that Jesus would return. Jesus was gone for good, they said. God was powerless. Belief was foolish.

The Epistle lesson offered a very different answer. God's timing is different. God is not slow, but patient. And here is an extraordinary phrase. God is waiting to return, because God wants *everyone* to come to repentance! That sounds like Love Wins and Rob Bell! Where is God? God *will* return. God *will* make everything new. But in the meantime, be patient, be at peace. And recognize that the patience of God is not passivity or powerlessness. It is salvation.

In each of these texts, people are yearning for something better. They are hurting, they are desperate, and they want God to come and fix the world. In each of these texts, a voice cries out words of comfort and reassurance. But they are not necessarily words that are expected or easy to hear. Where is God? God is mighty and powerful, yes, but God is also a gentle shepherd. Where is God? God confounds our expectations by sending Jesus the Messiah, not as a king, but as a baby. Where is God? God has not yet returned in a

powerful and angry way to show the world who is boss. God is waiting because God is gracious.

And how does this work for us? Where is God for people who are in pain? Where is God for people who are hurt, broken, devastated? Where is God for people who are sad or lonely or discouraged? Some religious people will say that God is in the miraculous healings or the dramatic interventions.

I'd like to tell you two stories that I found particularly moving in the last week.

The first is about Sarah, who lost so much as a child, and now is dealing with a painful and exhausting disease. I had asked my students to intentionally practice a spiritual exercise that we had read about in class. She chose the practice of paying attention. She went for a walk, but she started by paying attention to her body. Usually, she said, she tried to ignore her symptoms so that she could press on and live her life. This time she took a deep breath and took notice of every joint and muscle and let herself acknowledge the pain that she usually ignored. She wrote: "When I started thinking about it, I started crying. I realized that I had hardened myself so I could protect myself, that if I didn't acknowledge the agony that I feel on a daily basis, I could somehow be normal again. As I cried, I could feel all of the pent-up anger that I had been harboring within me come flooding out and I felt abandoned by God. The last time I had felt this way was when my dad died - I felt as though I had been alone in the world."

Where is God? Here is God. Not in dramatic healing. Not in taking away pain. Sarah realized that God was present in pain, and God was present in tears. She could grieve the loss of her parents and her good health, and she could feel both the absence and the presence of God in the midst of that grief.

Another student, we'll call her Katie, wrote about her father who had been emotionally abusive to her and her mother, and physically abusive to her brother. In a class presentation Katie read a letter she was writing to her father. She tells her father that she does not wish to have any more contact with him. He had hurt her family so deeply, and she refused to let him hurt her any more. It was a powerful moment in that class. She was lifting up her voice with strength. But she was also tearful, as was I and a number of other people in the class.

Some religious wisdom would tell Katie that God would want her to forgive her father. Some would even tell her that she was a bad person and deserved the abuse. Is that where God is? Right not, that is not where God is. Katie said no to the destructive relationship. She affirmed her value as a person. She didn't just acknowledge the pain of abuse. She chose to resist it. Here is God ... in this kind of strength and resistance. Here is God ... in Katie's vocation to be an activist for social justice, especially for gay and lesbian people, even though she is heterosexual. When Katie finished speaking, another student said, "my father abused us kids too." And God is there too ... in that ability to enable another person to speak honestly about the pain in his life.

I was struck by the power of tears in both these stories. We are often so afraid of tears ... or embarrassed by them. I know I am. But there is something healing about tears also. When I was thinking about my sermon title this week I read the draft of the bulletin and found that this health tip had been included. "Have a good cry. It can boost your immune system, reduce levels of stress hormones, eliminate depression and help you think more clearly."

Where is God? Sometimes God tears open the heavens and comes down in power and might. But perhaps more often, God appears in compassion, in tenderness. God appears in the wilderness and in waiting. God appears in tears, in pain, in a vocation, in the knowledge that we are not alone. Sometimes God is present in a voice crying in the wilderness. And sometimes, God is present in a good cry. Amen.