

Holy Chaos
Isaiah 64:1-9
Advent 1B
November 27, 2011
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What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the word "holy"? Is it peace, calm, silent awe? In a recent visioning team meeting we were discussing what about worship is important to each of us in the room. Holiness in many of these forms was right at the top of the list at the table I was sitting at.

There's no doubt that peace, calm, and silence often are holy experiences. The prophet Elijah hid out on a mountain fearing for his life and seeking God's protection. When tumultuous things happened, Elijah didn't experience God in the power of a storm, an earthquake or raging fire – but in the sound of deafening silence.

Yet, often people who are in search of God are looking for something more radical, something that will shake the earth and set their hearts and their lives on fire. In the December newsletter, Pastor Shelley recounted her holy experience in the pounding rain and driving rhythms of U2 at their concert this summer. The driving drum beats, the soaring lyrics and energy of 50,000 people filled every cell of one's body with a sense that something beyond themselves was at work around them. It was holy.

Likewise, the prophet Isaiah spoke on behalf of a people who were returning from a long period of life away from home. For 48 years, the Israelites had been forced to live in Babylon in modern day Iraq. They were relieved to be released from Babylon, but were devastated when they returned. Their homes back in Israel had been occupied by other people, their city was in ruins. More importantly, the temple – the place where the Living God dwelled – had been destroyed. All the hope that they held onto in exile had been dashed when what they thought would be a joyous homecoming ended up being a return to an overwhelming chaotic mess.

Isaiah cries out to God on behalf of the people, "O that You would tear open the heavens and come down! – so that mountains would quake at your presence, that fire kindles the brushwood and makes water boil - that your name would be known among your adversaries and the nations tremble at your presence!" There is no peace and serenity in the midst of this holiness. The people are looking for a God who will act in a way that everyone will notice. In their distress, they desire that God's vengeance would terrify the enemy and change the current situation they are living in. The status quo is no longer acceptable. They are tired of coming up against obstacles again and again only to discover that things aren't, and may never be, the same as they used to

be. It's not enough that God would look down on their situation and have pity on the people. God must come down and do something!

Does this desperate plea sound familiar? Just think of the cries that have rung out around the world in the last year.

- Tahrir Square in Cairo was filled with hundreds of thousands, and is again, to demand a change in government.
- Tens of thousands have marched on Madison, WI when the governor pushed legislation to end many benefits for public workers.
- People formed the Tea Party movement to change the face of government by demanding lower taxes and less government involvement.
- Others around the world have joined the Occupy movement in protest of corporate greed and unequal distribution of wealth.

There is so much unrest in the world. There are so many that seem to be crying out, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" Lord, can't you do something about all this unrest? Won't you come and clean up the mess we've made of the world and our lives? When we see so many things in the world going so wrong, we can't help but want things to be different.

The place in the world I feel this most lately is in the Horn of Africa. They cannot catch a break. Innocent people in this part of the world have endured decades of war, poverty and lawlessness. Children are born without much chance of survival. Now drought and famine have ravaged the area, putting hundreds of thousands at risk of malnourishment and starvation. A thousand people a day are arriving in the Dabaab Refugee Camp on the border of Kenya and Somalia. This is many people's last hope of survival. As Christians, we can't help but cry out for God to infuse hope in this otherwise hopeless situation.

In worship on Wednesday nights during Advent, all offering will go to help people arriving at the Dabaab Refugee Camp through Lutheran World Relief. Their services are providing invaluable emergency nourishment and medical care for the weakest of the people entering the camp.

Advent is all about yearning for what *is* to be something different – for the incomplete, unacceptable ways of the world to be made whole and right again. We anticipate. We hope. We prepare for God's promised *future* to be fulfilled. Advent calls us to anticipate that God will tear open the heavens once again and come down. It's not just about remembering that God did come down in the baby Jesus 2000 years ago. We

also anticipate the role Jesus plays in the final days, when he will come to restore and recreate the world as God had intended from the very beginning of time.

As we finish up the last of the turkey from Thanksgiving this weekend, it's easy to turn our attention to the Christmas season – the shopping, the baking, the travel planning and anticipation of holiday get-togethers. We are tempted to break out the Nordic sweaters, lefse and egg nog to feel that warm Spirit of Christmas. But maybe even as we do that, we should put on our work boots and a hazmat suit, because heavens opening and God coming down can get awfully messy.

When God comes down, hope breaks out for a world that looks radically different from the one we live in. Justice reigns for all people, not just for those with enough money and influence to persuade it to fall in their favor. The low are raised up, the mighty may tumble from their perch. Love triumph over power and mercy reigns supreme.

We live in a constantly chaotic world where it takes an awful lot of focus to see any of this happening. The question to ask is, "What kind of chaos are we living in?" Is it a chaos that brings people together in hope, love and joy? Is it a chaos that leaves us and others feeling more isolated, fearful and convinced that we are better off on our own than we are with each other?

Ana is a spunky five year old. She loves to color and ask questions. She loves to run and play outside with her sister. She is a little girl who worships with her family at my previous congregation. Ana also lives with an inoperable brain tumor at the base of her brain stem. Just after her third birthday, she started getting sick. After ruling out a number of other routine maladies, the doctors thought that there would be a slim chance she had a tumor. That's exactly what they found. She had a biopsy and started chemo. The diagnosis of cancer brought an incredible amount of chaos into her and her family's life. For a year and a half she endured regular treatments that made her sick and made her parents, in their darkest most fearful moments, wonder what kind, if any, future their little girl would have.

In the midst of the chaos of treatments and dr appts, she and her family made friends with just about anyone they encountered. They raised awareness and funds for childhood cancers. They surrounded themselves with people who would hold on to hope with them and hold it for them on days when their supply was running low.

Today, the tumor remains, but is stable. Every three months, they gear up for another scan to see what this intruder in their lives is doing. What I think is remarkable about Ana's journey is that her family has asked God to bless this journey and invited God fully into their presence – trusting that God can break open the heavens and come down into their chaos. This is what her mom says on the front page of Ana's Caring Bridge site: "We ask you to join us in praying that her tumor images remain stable as we watch them every 3 months, and live in the meanwhile. Your prayers have gotten us through so much...they nourish our spirit and soul, keep our heads up, our hearts open and remind us of our good and gracious God's faithfulness."

The chaos that breaks into our lives is not often chosen. Yet, in faith, it can be a life of holy chaos. As people of faith, we are joined to Ana's story and the Israelites. We are joined to the refugee workers and those stumbling into the camp hoping against hope that there is a new way of life being prepared. In the story we share, we are rejoined to God's faithful goodness, even as chaos swirls around us. Yet, God is our Father, we are the clay, he is the potter who carefully and lovingly forms and reforms us over and over again. He is the one who tears open the heavens and comes down in love through Jesus Christ and who shows the world his love not in power, but in servitude. Not in domination, but in submission – even to the point of death. There's nothing that gets by this God.

So, is our faith in God large enough to invite God into the muck and mire of our lives? Will we be bold enough to cry with the prophet, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down – and expect and believe that in our darkest most fearful hours that God is working on restoring and recreating our lives, in the midst of our imperfect, often chaotic world? Do we believe that the chaos we are experiencing is leading to something more beautiful? With faith and hope, the answer is "Yes", even as it seems that we can't quite see it yet. When it comes to finding the holy in the chaos of this world, English poet Ralph Hodgson puts it this way, "Some things need to be believed to be seen." Amen.