

Advent IV  
December 23, 2018

All Saints' Church  
Year C

Micah 5:2-5a  
Canticle 15: The Song of Mary

Hebrews 10:5-10  
Luke 1:39-55

You purify our conscience dear Lord by your daily visitations upon us.  
Help us to see and recognize your visitation into our lives.

We begin this morning with Psalm 80. Psalm 80 is a plea from a people, both captive and suffering, isolated from their home-land. It's a prayer, a cry for deliverance.

Like all laments, Psalm 80 is personal and intimate as it exposes feelings of anguish, fear, and despair. "Where is God?" the people ask. Abandoned by friends and neighbors, with even their enemies mocking them from a distance, there is no answer, and their beseeching and wailing begins.

I don't think it takes too much imagination to put ourselves inside Psalm 80. Even if we are secure and healthy as individuals, we have friends and family and neighbors who are not. Civil servants are not getting paid, days before Christmas; my nephew just got laid off as a driver for Nabisco. Families are torn apart by different political agendas or philosophical certainties. Incurable illnesses still strike randomly. Tragic accidents happen. Innocent people are killed. We just heard this week that receiving food stamp assistance for the millions who are food insecure will become more difficult. The opioid crisis, linked too closely to poverty and limited access to resources, continues to be on the rise, with New Hampshire still ranking second in the nation for opioid-related deaths.

And we know our global communal life is in chaos. Death-dealing terrorists of all stripes continue to roam the earth, with despotic authoritarian rulers' capacity to limit democracies gaining ground. Alliances are breaking down. The news is filled with too many images of tent cities, fires and flooding out of control, and children starving.

"Where are you God in this mess?" The Psalmist makes an ultimatum, "Stop feeding us with bread of tears or giving us bowls of tears to drink. Do something!"

We must remember that this cry, this lament, this demand for God to act and to fix things *is a prayer*. I don't know about you, but that gives me some solace. Our prayers can be desperate, full of anger and fear. Don't ever feel guilty when you don't curb your emotions or bottle up how you are really feeling. Don't appeal too quickly to "God is God and my place is to trust in God, no matter what" as a fast solution or denial of pain, especially if you are needing to vent.

Sometimes, we just need to be pulling out our hair in front of God, and not rushing away from our passionate angst. We need to sit with it. To share it. Anger can be a gift. Despair poignant. Even Jesus overturned tables in anger. Even Jesus asked, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Even Jesus.

And so we wait for deliverance. It is Advent, a time of waiting.

“Look,” says Luke, “your salvation is right here.” It comes through these two women. Two women meeting in the hill country, meeting in the “sticks.” Two nobodies meeting nowhere important, terrified, clinging to each other for support, confused about the new life gestating in their wombs, still in darkness. And waiting, for what, they know not.

We know, though.

Mary will give birth to Jesus, the Proclaimer of our salvation and Elizabeth will give birth to John, the proclaimer of the Proclaimer. The two men will be inextricably linked. If Jesus is the carpenter, building up our lives of faith and the very foundation of our being, our salvation, through love and mercy, I see John as the demolition crew, tearing apart our lives. Sometimes the demolition crew comes in so we don’t become complacent, arrogant or too easily satisfied, but sometimes the demolition crew moves into our lives “just because,” at no fault of our own, hinged by the fickle variances of “things happen.”

Life includes both.... The carpenter building and the demolition crew destroying; possibly on all levels: physical, social, spiritual, economic, familial, on all levels. How do we live within this tension of carpenters building us up and demolition crews tearing us down and not become cynical or controlling, crazy or uncaring?

Maybe the million-dollar question! In other words: How are we to live a life of faith? Especially, when sometimes faith just doesn’t make rational sense. How do we accept the good with the bad and still feel held by God?

Mary, whose cradle for Jesus will turn into a cross, who will know suffering, whose heart will be pierced with a sword, sings a song. She, the midwife of Hope Incarnate promises us that the Mighty One will scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, pull down the powerful from their thrones, send the rich away empty, and exalt the hungry with good things.

This is Mary’s song: the love of power will be transformed into the power of love. Redemption is coming from a different source. Do not look to kings or rulers or the rich or the plentiful. Instead look to the lowly estate of these two women, willing to hand over their hearts and minds and bodies and souls to a New Way, a New Age of Trust.

On good days, I believe in this surrender and the Hope of Mary. That love will conquer death. That there is a Light and darkness cannot overcome it. That it’s God’s will and not mine that will win the day. That every step I take, no matter how weak, is held precious in the sight of the One who created me. These are my good days, and I trust in these days because I have a community of faith to lean on.

But then there are those bad days. We all have them. I don’t think we should feel guilty. But what are we to do? I think Cousin Elizabeth of Advent can give us a hand.

We wait.

Like Elizabeth, who was barren for most of her life, we, too, will find life. It will come. How, sometimes we know not, but it will come.

We wait.

Like Elizabeth, no one important, living in the hill country of nowhere, is visited by the mother of the Savior of the world. We too will be visited by the Savior of the world. He will find us... even if we are hidden in some remote place of our own making.

We wait.

Like Elizabeth, we will be filled with the Holy Spirit and recognize that we, too, have visitations of the Lord breaking into our lives. And we, too, will have the courage to see them, recognize them, and proclaim them.

We wait.

Waiting is sacred, holy, not captured by time, beyond limitations. Yet real. Womb-like.

When I was young, around 25, I was the guest to an Italian family living on a farm just outside Florence. I was discouraged, barely making ends meet, lost, lonely and feeling left behind. It was Christmas Eve, and after an early simple supper, I was escorted to a pitch dark guest room to take a nap, as everyone was taking a nap before the Midnight Mass. I fell asleep immediately and then a few hours later, I woke up to monks chanting.

I couldn't see a thing, the room still shuttered. I had no idea where I was, who I was, if I were alive or dead. It was as if I were both. If alive, would I live another minute? If dead, it didn't matter, as I felt so much peace. The haunting eeriness of the monks' chant settled into my chest, heavy and yet light. Maybe the closest I will ever get to experiencing both the builder and the demolition crew as one. Jesus and John working on my soul. I was me and not me. Lost and yet found.

I waited. I knew consciousness was going to return. I was in no rush. I didn't want to lose the peace. I didn't want to know who I was or where I was. I wanted to stay in this inviting space between the footsteps of living. To trust in it.

I waited, and came into myself, and began to cry.

"Advent is a message that shakes us up," so said Alfred Delp, German priest and Nazi resistor who was executed for his faith. Advent "shakes us up so that we will come to know who we are and to whom we belong,"

I was still lost, hurting, lonely and afraid, but I knew to whom I belonged. And that has made all the difference.

Amen.