



A Year End Lament

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

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For the past week, I've been listening to Advent music on Pandora. Yes, I started listening to Advent music before Thanksgiving this year. It's not something I'm proud of, but when I sit down to start writing sermons for Advent, I like to create an atmosphere that fits the setting for the sermon. And, well, here we are in Advent – so I needed Advent music to help set the stage.

You won't be surprised by this, but there's not a lot of *good* Advent music out there – at least not on popular radio. There's no official Advent radio station on Pandora. All of the music I could find is, well, it's a replica of what you'll find if you turn on WGTS 91.9. It's a mix of contemporary Christian music that kind of relates to Christmas, and then Christmas music itself. Call me a liturgical snob if you want, but Christmas music and Advent music are *not* the same.

I had to create my own Advent Playlist, hand selecting about 25 songs that were appropriate for Advent to help create this atmosphere of anticipation that defines the season of Advent. And even in creating my own playlist, I had to make some exceptions just to make sure I wasn't listening to the same 3 songs over and over again. I mean, really, why is it that in contemporary Christian music, the only three Advent songs anyone wants to reproduce are O Come, O Come Emmanuel, Come Thou Long Expected Jesus, and Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing? Do we know any Advent songs that don't use the word "Come" in the title? Seriously, if you have a favorite contemporary *Advent* song, share it in the chat, because I need some more music in my playlist.

I lament the lack of focus on Advent and how quick we are to jump to Christmas, but, if we're being honest, I'm not surprised by it. Advent is a lot like Lent – it's a season of preparation. It's a season of penitence. There's a reason that Advent and Lent both share the liturgical color purple – the purple symbolizes preparation, penance, and sacrifice. As seasons of preparation, Advent and Lent are both alike. Ultimately, while important in their own ways, both lead us to a more joyful celebration to come. And we, perhaps best defined as western civilization, we don't like to wait for what we want. Advent is a good example – like Lent, Advent began as a 40-day period of preparation, a practice still followed in the Greek Orthodox Church. Though today, in the western world, we give advent just four weeks. We know what we want, and candidly, we want it now.

We are a people who are always looking for shortcuts and time savers. We don't want microwaves or ovens, we want Instapots and fast food. We don't want layaway purchases, we want credit cards. We don't want the local train, we want the express train that skips all the intermediary stops. I don't name this to shame us, but to acknowledge the truth. I mean, I get

it. I hate sitting in traffic – you know, back when traffic was still a thing. I’ve long said, if teleportation ever becomes a real possibility, I will not be an early adopter, I will be the *first* adopter. There’s nothing that irks me more than wasting time travelling from point A to point B. Let’s just get there already.

And just as further confirmation of how much we really dislike the seasons of preparation, even though Advent is four weeks long, over two times longer than Christmas’ 12 days, as you walk through any home décor store, you won’t find much in the way of Advent decorations. But Christmas décor has been on sale since before Halloween. See, we don’t like to focus on the seasons of repentance or confession – no, our focus is generally on the celebration that concludes the season of waiting.

Perhaps more than usual, this year seems especially focused on the Christmas celebration. I started seeing people talk about Christmas decorations back in the summer. There was an invitation that went out, offering, “Go ahead and start decorating for Christmas in July. If any year, this is the year to decorate early.” There’s a deep longing for the joy, the comfort, the excitement, and the relief that comes with Christmas. And I agree, there is a renewed hope that Christmas brings that we all want and need.

And yet, even acknowledging how desperate we are for Christmas and the hope it brings, I’m cautious to expedite our journey through Advent. In fact, I’m intentional about acknowledging the importance of Advent as we head into Christmas this year. *It’s been a year.* And, while I get our desire to quickly depart 2020 and move into 2021, an accompanying trait of the Christmas celebration, Advent does not speed up our movement. If anything, Advent invites us to take pause, to consider and reflect on the year we have had. The purpose of this season is not to magnify the brokenness that exists, but it offers us a joint invitation to travel “the road of Advent together as honestly as we can on a quest for encouragement, hope, and strength in the place we are currently living – emotionally, spiritually, and physically.”ⁱ

In her book, *A Weary World*, Kathy Escobar offers, “Hope comes from embracing the paradox and contradicting things living in the same space at the same time. ... It comes from engaging with the stories in the Bible with a new lens that shatters the veneer of a false positivity built on “just believing in the right things.””ⁱⁱ The purpose of Advent is not to dismiss the reality of our pain. The purpose of the season of waiting is not to delay the healing we all long for and desire. The purpose of the preparation is not to ignore what is, nor what will be. But Advent gives us this chance to pause, because “Honoring reality is healthy.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The Psalms offer us a good starting point to enter this season of Advent.

The Psalmist does not deny reality when petitioning the Lord. In our modern lingo, we would say, “The Psalmist tells it like it is.” The good and the bad, the Psalms offer praise to God, and they chastise God. They give thanks to God, and they condemn God. They bemoan God, and they seek help from God. Anyone who has ever said, “don’t question God’s will or God’s way,”

has clearly never spent much time reading the Psalms. Such questioning is part of our faithful witness.

Today's scripture, coming in Psalm 80, offers us an example of a cry of lament. It presents for us a similar petition to what we may ask of God today.

As you know, the context of the text matters. Unfortunately, we don't have an exact date or context for the writing of this Psalm. Based on the names found in verse 2, Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, the suggested context is that the Psalm was written out of the Northern Kingdom of Israel shortly before its final conquest by the Assyrians. It reads as a lament from a people who are about to be sent into exile. But, as no record of timing really exists, regarding the context, Old Testament scholar, James Mays, offers, "Whatever the original historical setting, the psalm in its continued usage belongs to the repertoire of the afflicted people of God on their way through the troubles of history."^{iv}

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If I may be so bold, it seems, as God's people living through one of the most challenging years of *our* history, we might claim this text for our use. To claim this text for our troubles, let's consider what we're offering to God.

To begin, verses 4-6 name the distress of God's people. "O Lord, God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" Without question, in seasons of distress and brokenness, it often feels like God is ignoring our prayers of supplication. To us, in our weariness, it seems God is either not listening, or is disappointed in the prayers we ask. To push back on such a lament, I have heard more times that I can count, as faithful Christians quote 1 John 5:14-15, which says, "Whatever we ask in accordance with God's will, God hears us. And if God hears us, we have obtained the requests made of God." There's a gross misrepresentation of the promise, "Knock, and it shall be given unto you." As if, anything we ask, God will answer. There's a faulty belief that God is our puppet, and we are the puppet master. Again, pay attention to the Biblical Word, in its entirety. Like Psalm 80, there are plenty of examples in the Biblical text of God's people questioning if God is listening. It is clear, we are not the first to wonder why God is not responding to our prayers.

We speak the words as the Psalmists laments, "how long will you be angry with our prayers?" Why aren't you responding in our favor? Why do we continue to suffer?

As we keep reading the lament of the Psalm, perhaps again, we find ourselves sharing in the disdain of the Psalmist. It's not just that we are suffering, but it feels as if the suffering is of God's doing. "*You,*" the Psalmist agitates, "You, [God,] make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves." (We're talking about Israel, not America, right?) "The prayer [acknowledges] that the congregation's distress is the work of divine wrath."^v

I've tried to walk a fine line this year in my own thinking, as I have compared our year of social exile to the exilic periods that Israel suffered. The Biblical text makes clear that the Israelites suffering was always thought to be due to divine repercussions. Such a suggestion today would seem religiously fanatical. To say that COVID, or the social exile of COVID, are of God's design goes against the very nature we believe defines God. Surely, we do not believe God has a desire for any of God's created to suffer – much less suffer the weight of loss and isolation that has defined 2020. But we all know that pain, at least to some degree. As I preach this sermon today, I know of multiple family members who currently have COVID. Someone called the church Wednesday afternoon asking for prayer, as his father had just died of COVID. A clergy colleague posted earlier this week that she's lost her sense of smell. Many of our Thanksgiving tables were emptier than the tables of last year. And here, today, we gather online, doing our best to limit the viral spread of COVID by worshipping in digital community, rather than together in the Sanctuary. The virus is no joke, nor are its consequences. Surely we do not credit God with such devastation and heartache.

As I read the Psalmist's lament, and as I reflect on the greater work of God's Word, I'm not convinced the community of God's people really ever believed God willed harm upon them. That may have been their named rationale, it may have been the Psalmist's lament, but I'm not sure that God's people really believed God wanted their suffering or demise.

We turn to God in lament and anger, because we believe God has the capacity to ensure such ill does not afflict us. Knowing of God's power over the temporary and the eternal, our only explanation for such harm in the here and now is that God must have chosen it. It's our way of coping, as God's limited creation, to explain unexplainable or undesirable events.

But, even as we decry God's participation in such detriment, we turn to God in hopeful prayer. "Restore us, O God of hosts, let your face shine, that we might be saved. ... Give us life, and we will call on your name." "The community in faith dares to pray even to the angry God, because they trust God to do what could not be hoped for on the strength of human analogies."^{vi} Though we blame God for such pain and suffering, we are also determined that God is the only one who can save us.

And this, this promise, this inkling of hope, this prayerful expectation – this is Advent. In our deepest, darkest, most broken and isolated moments of life, this is where God comes to us. His name shall be *Emmanuel*, God with us.

Rev. Jan Richardson offers, "In the womb, in the night, in the dreaming; when we are lost, when our world has come undone, when we cannot see the next step in the path; in all the darkness that attends our life, whether hopeful darkness or horrendous, God meets us. God's first priority is not to do away with the dark but to be present to us in it."^{vii}

This is Advent.

The beauty of God is not how quickly we move from brokenness to healing. The power of light is not the instantaneous righting of wrong. The glory of God in Christ is the eternal massaging of the eternal arc, which under God's constant working bends toward justice.

We do not need too quickly move through Advent so that we might hurriedly arrive at the Christmas celebration. We need not think that God can't do any work until we celebrate the birth of the child. We can trust that the light that is born, the child who is King, the love of God in the nativity is born into our brokenness. This hope is birthed from our darkness. This truth rises from our agony of uncertainty.

So let us not deny our reality, but let us be honest in our pain, for God meets us here. We are not alone in the brokenness. The love of God is present with us, leading us, and providing for us the glimpse of hope that shall lead us through. So may God sustain us in our weariness, that as God's Advent people, we may claim in hopeful expectation, "Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved." Amen.

ⁱ Kathy Escobar. *A Weary World*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Escobar.

ⁱⁱⁱ Escobar.

^{iv} James L. Mays. *Psalms: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

^v Mays.

^{vi} Arthur Wiser. *The Psalms*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1998.

^{vii} Jan Richardson. *The Luminous Darkness*. December 2015. <http://adventdoor.com>. Retrieved November 2020.