

Crying is allowed

Isaiah 64:1-12

November 27, 2005

It's November 27, 2005, a new day, a day that has never occurred before and will never be repeated, and you are in church.

It's Sunday, the Sunday after Thanksgiving, the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday since our Thanksgiving Sunday worship service a week ago, and you are in church. You are one week older, your children are one week older, and the world is a different place. Your world -- our world -- and history itself continue to spin forward ...

Gas prices are down, but utility companies are warning us to expect heating costs this winter up to fifty percent higher than last winter.

We buried one member of our church family this week, Fern Clements, and one more long time member, Frances Boller, died on Thanksgiving Day.

There have been more deaths in Iraq -- two American soldiers died on Thanksgiving Day itself, and more than 200 Iraqis have died in bombing attacks in the last ten days. A prominent Sunni leader and members of his family were assassinated this week by men wearing the uniform of the Iraqi security forces, an ominous development whether the assassins were Iraqi soldiers or Sunni insurgents pretending to be Iraqi soldiers.

A pro-war Democrat called for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, touching off a heated and very personal debate, and Cindy Sheehan has resumed her Crawford, Texas vigil.

The prime minister of Israel shocked his nation by leaving the political party he founded to form a new centrist party, hoping to overcome some of the internal roadblocks to making peace with the Palestinians, even as violence between Israelis and Palestinians continues unabated.

An article in the Miami Herald this week drew attention to a new generation of people left homeless, low-wage workers uprooted and priced out of available housing by the effects of seven hurricanes in fifteen months.

"Black Friday" saw local big box stores opening at 5:30 am and hoping for record sales. John Deere announced record profits, while General Motors announced the layoff of 30,000 employees and Northwest Airlines pilots and flight attendants agreed to wage cuts of over twenty percent to help keep the airline in business.

"Intelligent Design" is being debated in the courtroom, and very soon our national motto, "In God We Trust," will be debated in the courtroom.

And Jesus is being left behind. Jesus, the real Jesus, the Jesus who defies easy categorization, the Jesus who calls us to love our enemies and give ourselves away, is being left behind by the religious left and the religious right alike.

That is the convincing argument of Miroslav Wolf, a Yale Divinity School professor, in this week's *Christian Century* magazine. He tells the story of an atheist in Colorado

Springs who asked a friend with whom he had been discussing Jesus, *What kind of Christian are you?*

An evangelical, his friend replied.

You can't be an evangelical, said the atheist. *You are talking about Jesus!*

Why would he say that? Because he hears evangelicals talk about abortion, homosexuality, family values, prayer in schools, creationism in schools, Supreme Court justices ... but not Jesus!

It's November 27, 2005 and you are in church. I assume you are in church for some good reason, that you come here with some expectation ... to meet good friends, to hear some good music, to enjoy a restful and thoughtful morning retreat, to listen to a message that will make you think or lift your spirits or suggest a new direction.

But it must be more than that. You must be in church because you want something from God, because you expect something from God. Comfort or assurance or acceptance. Forgiveness or guidance or love. To find in God's presence strength enough to face another week.

Is that what you expect from God? Is that all you expect from God? Do you come here looking for God, only to walk away into the rest of your life leaving God behind in the sanctuary?

What do you expect from God out there? What do you expect from God amidst the spinning wheel of human history? What do you expect God to do about war, about homelessness, about poverty, about disease, about enmity between races, about enmity between religious groups, about political polarization, about a misdirected sense of values, about misinformed faith, about a misguided church, about everything that is happening in our world this week? What do you expect God to do? Nothing?

Nothing ...

The author of the book of Isaiah expected God to do something. He wrote in a time when the city of Jerusalem, like many of the cities of Israel, lay in ruins, ransacked and leveled by invading armies. The Temple had been looted and burned, and many of the people of Israel carried off into exile. For a long time, for a very long time, it had seemed that God just wasn't there or just didn't care.

But he remembers the "good old days," a time seven centuries before his own time, the time of the exodus from Egypt:

There was a time when you came and did terrifying things ... when you did such deeds for those who put their hope in you ... Come now! ... Why don't you tear open the sky and come down?

The problem, of course, is that the "good old days" were never really as good as we remember them. Even in the days of the exodus, the people were not happy with God, crying and complaining about hunger and thirst and threatening enemies. But at least they cried. And at least the prophet cries. He looks at his world, his own place in history as history spins forwards, and he cries out to God:

Look at us! We are in pain, we are homeless, we are desolate! We know we

have brought pain and suffering down on our own heads; it is our own fault. But we know you can do something about it, and you must do something about it because you made us! We are like clay and you are like the potter. We belong to you. You are our father. Have pity on your children!

The prophet doesn't blame God, but he holds God accountable for what God can do. The prophet feels God's absence in his bones, but the fact of God's absence doesn't lead him to doubt God, but to demand that God show up! That's faith! Among God's people, crying is allowed, crying is expected, crying is an act of faith.

We are God's people. What do we expect God to do? And what memories will we draw on to remind ourselves of what God can do?

During Advent, we remind ourselves of Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, God who comes to us, but what sort of Jesus do we remember? An appealing baby, or the maligned and rejected and bloodied savior of the world? A comforting friend, or a man who turns the world with its powers and pretenses on its ear? One who brings peace to human souls, or one who brings peace to all the world? One who can change human hearts, or one who can change human history? Or both?

What do you expect from Jesus now? Are you ready to cry and complain and protest and demand?

Tear open the sky! Make the mountains shake with fear! Come and reveal your power! Come! Come, Lord Jesus! Come to us now!

Crying is allowed! It is a sign of faith, an expression of hope ...

Hope that Jesus, the Prince of Peace, can break down the walls that divide us, can teach us to love our enemies, can bring peace to Iraq, to Israel, to Palestine.

Hope that Jesus, the defender of the poor, will defend the cause of the homeless and the jobless, that Jesus will do something to help them, and that Jesus will teach us to care enough to do something.

Hope that Jesus, the light of the world, will open our eyes, that we will be passionate not about winning a culture war, but about telling Good News, not about defending Jesus, but about following Jesus, not about making this a Christian nation, but about being Christian people.

Hope that Jesus, our Risen Lord, will raise us and those we love and our dying world itself to new life, to eternal life.

Come Lord Jesus!