

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
November 29, 2020
Tasks of Transformation
Isaiah 64:1-9, I Cor 1:4- 9

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

I Cor 1:4- 9

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Message

Today begins the season of Advent; four Sundays of preparation, culminating on Christmas Eve. While Quakers don't traditionally observe Advent, when we are in the meetinghouse we gradually increase decorations- a garland, wreath, trees surrounded by "snow," a stable, and finally a lighted manger. Starting tonight at our Advent Evenings at Home families will share how they prepare.

Scholars do not know exactly when the tradition of a period of preparation for Christmas began – it was certainly in existence from about 480 CE. In 567 CE

penitence including fasting was added.¹ Penitential preparation with fasting can refocus attention from things of the world to spiritual things. It can also increase anticipation of all the good treats of Christmas and save up our calories and our food supplies for the big gala. It can help increase gratitude and appreciation.

Our reading from Isaiah is very penitential; filled with acknowledgment of shortcomings and repentance. It recognizes God's presence and call to a higher way of living and being. In 80 years of Babylonian captivity the Israelites had plenty of time to consider and confront their thoughts, actions, and failures to act, as well as that of their ancestors; things that caused and maintained separation from God, themselves and others. We might be able to relate to some of their despair, grief, yearning, fear, hopelessness and feelings of isolation and separation after what we have experienced over the past 8 months, the uncertainty of the past three weeks, the desperation of the past four years.

As we begin Advent, what are the things you need to confront and become aware of in your life that separate you from God, yourself and others? What is there that is not in concert with a higher way of living and being?

Last week in our adult meeting for learning we read Parker Palmer's meditation on the "divided life." Parker wrote: "A "still small voice" speaks the

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advent>

truth about me, my work, or the world. I hear it and yet act as if I did not..." In spite of wanting to be whole and live a life of wholeness we are often divided.

I want to live a life of integrity and be centered, loving and peaceful. But this week I was divided while listening to a woman express exuberant gratitude about being with family for the first time in ten years. I wanted to listen to her joy and wish them well. I certainly understood the yearning to be reunited with loved ones. But when she boasted they had violated all the health rules and said she did not care I became angry and resentful. Integrity demanded I examine my reaction.

What I discovered was my unprocessed emotions were triggered. My "Mom Jean" died a week ago. She and I followed all the quarantine rules and I have not seen her for months. Except for one last good bye with "Dad" she was alone the last three weeks of her life. Now I know Mom was at peace when she died and is at peace now. I know I cannot blame everyone who has not followed the rules over the past eight months for the fact that the virus is raging, much less people who didn't follow them after she died. I realized my anger at the woman served no purpose than to distract me from the truth; I need to turn from busy-ness and make time to process my grief and memories of Mom to be loving, peaceful and whole.

What are the things we need to confront and become aware of in our lives that separate us from God, ourselves and others? What is there that is not in concert with a higher way of living and being?

Isaiah wrote: “But you [God] were angry, and [so] we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.” That sounds like blaming God for our actions. When we say, “What we have done is so bad only you [God] can fix it. Only Divine restitution by you can restore our relationship”- we also say- “in the future you will have to bail us out again.” What are we doing to be whole and to build our relationship with God?

Last week Vanessa Julye brought us a message about our brokenness as individuals, a culture and a country in regard to racism. She also provided a handout to us in that pointed out serious transgressions against people of color made by our Quakers ancestors. In this time of preparation for the coming of the Light/Christ, what responsibility and action might we be called to take to heal the divisions of our history and in our country between people?

Sometimes the troubles of the world feel overwhelming. How can we possibly take on the tasks of transformation for ourselves much less the world? Over the past few months I have learned what we can do and are called to do is to awaken and acknowledge where and when mistakes are made, repent/change the action, and work to repair and restore relationship. It goes like this:

I am called to be aware and see when something is broken. I may realize, “Oh, I broke it and I need to say I’m sorry” or “I didn’t break it but I still need to be part of fixing it” because I want to see and invest my all my energy and resources in

building a better world. Then I need to figure out how not to break it again and I need to work to restore the relationship. I need to act in a new way that gives back the dignity and respect I or my ancestors tried to take by my or their actions.

I also learned it is important that we see that not only are we all unique but we are all imperfect and that is okay. We can all learn and we learn different things on our journeys in different ways and different times. A good dose of humility is essential and can help to avoid hubris. We can accept that in God's eyes we are enough in this moment while realizing and confessing we are not fully formed. We may not have known better, but once we know we must to do better.

Advent is a tool offered for our use. In the traditional sense, "It can be used to anticipate the "coming of Christ" from three perspectives: the physical nativity in Bethlehem, the reception of Christ in the heart of the believer, and the eschatological Second Coming."² But in I Corinthians Paul writes these are already ours: "the grace of God ...given you in Christ Jesus... in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind... you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful... you [are] called into the fellowship..."

As Friends we know the Light of God, Christ is revealed in us always. We know the Light has never left us so it does not need to return each year or in a

² Ibid

Second coming. We know the beloved community, Heaven, Immanuel, God is already with us. Yet we know we are also tempted by the divided life when we do not allow Immanuel to reside within us, to be acknowledged by us, or lived into us every minute of every day. Advent offers us another opportunity to slow down, examine where we are divided and prepare ourselves anew in anticipation of the celebration of God's gift of Light/Love to the world.

Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus- we are preparing and are prepared. Joy of every longing heart, as we take up the tasks of transforming and being transformed we are freed and we are released.