

## *In Prayer*, a Sermon by Amo Ngoepe

Isaiah 64:1-9

Advent 1 2020, 29 Nov 2020

Let us pray

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable and pleasing in your sight, oh God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

It is the first Sunday of advent, what an unexpected year 2020 has been, it feels near miraculous that we are even able to gather this day.

And I think the essence of today's passage invites us in to feel the weight of what this year has been, even as we all have somehow navigated making a way out of no way; we are invited to cry out to God for help, to wrestle with God, to share our laments, frustrations, anger - to wonder where God is

In today's passage, we meet the Israelites in prayer, they come to God in a posture of prayer

This posture of prayer is significant, it is significant because when we come to God in prayer, more than in other ways, we can't help but be confronted with ourselves – with all of who we are, we are almost thrust into an unravelling, we come vulnerable, bare before a God we know sees us and accepts all of who we are

James Baldwin, one of the prophets of our time, through his novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, helps us to understand more intricately how important and significant our cries in prayer are, that it is there that we meet our deepest selves, and are inevitably met by God and others

One of the characters, Florence, finds out that she is sick – dying, and she has not told anyone. She is sixty and she has not been to church in a very long time, yet in her most vulnerable,

unuttered moment, her only solace is church. She remembers how her mother used to pray for her when she was younger. Her mother would say “the way to pray was to forget everything and everyone but Jesus; to pour out of the heart, like water from a bucket, all evil thoughts, all thoughts of self, all malice for one’s enemies; to come boldly, and yet more humbly than a little child, before the Giver of all good things.” So Florence is at church for the first time in a long time. Baldwin tells us that “she beat her fists on the alter, the old woman above her laid hands on her shoulders, crying: “Call on Him, daughter! Call on the Lord!” And it was as though she had been hurled outward into time, where no boundaries were... and she cried aloud, as she had never in all her life cried before, falling on her face on the alter, at the feet of the old, black woman. Her tears came down like burning rain. The voice whispered in her ear: “Gods got your number and knows where you live.”

We encounter Florence in one of the most vulnerable moments of her life. She hasn’t told anyone about her illness, but she can take it to God in the church. In her reaching out for help, she is met, held and received—by God and by the women working in the church. She finally lets go in the warmth and comfort of community.

In prayer, Florence was able “to pour out of the heart”, to let it out. Ann Ulanov says of prayer that “when we pray to be cured of illness... a passing difficulty or one that might be very serious indeed, we have little trouble admitting what it is that is bothering us.... but in our prayer, we usually let it out.”

She says that prayer brings to surface those deep emotions, images and experiences. Therefore in praying, “unresolved tensions” are brought to surface, enabling mourning if necessary, and a recovery of sense of self; recovering God in us, that generative place that then begets love, kindness, tenderness towards ourselves and others.

Prayer enables us to face the tough moments with creativity and curiosity.

Similarly, the Israelites in today's text pray to God in a time of confusion and struggle. They are having flashbacks from the past. Remembering Mount Sinai, they are longing, lamenting, nostalgic for a time when they felt the presence of God, a place where they felt more order and direction. In the midst of their unravelling, they cry out to God for help,, their help from ages past. They are experiencing a plethora of emotions, they beseech God to see them. This posture of prayer that the Israelites come with is a way of being that allows us to be present to the here and now.

This season of advent will be like no other. Many of us will not be with our family and friends in the ways we have known. We are navigating new terrain.

This season may find us, in the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, *sick and tired of being sick and tired*

COVID-19 and the many lives lost; an election cycle that has shattered all precedents; children separated from their parents at the border, parents who can't be found; students, teachers and parents navigating the daily hardships of distance learning; losing loved ones and having to grieve in a different way; job losses; increases in gender-based violence, police brutality, racism, the day-to-day threats to black and brown lives, trans lives...

Maybe like Florence, like the Israelites, we start this season of advent before God in a posture of prayer, a posture of reaching out for help (in our waiting)

Come to me, those who are worn and heavily laden, and I will give you rest

Perhaps we are carrying things that we need to "let out", and some of which we don't even know we're carrying, not knowing where to turn to, or who to turn to...

this posture of prayer becomes even more important, to turn to God, to turn to others, this posture allows us to let out, to feel into the humanity of another, to learn to ask for help, to reach out and ask for what we need, to offer help, a posture that allows us to simply be where we are while also helping us to imagine and to act otherwise.

I imagine this posture of prayer allows us too to be honest about our internalized racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia. This posture helps us to be honest about where we are, what we don't know, and to be honest about what we *do* know, to stand in the truth of our convictions

I pray that our prayer gives us the strength to reach out and ask for support: call a friend if you need to talk, ask someone to cook an extra meal for your family, find creative and fun ways to connect safely with others, ask for help with Christmas shopping, reach out, write a letter of thought to someone

As daunting as this might feel, this way of coming bare before God, of intentionally allowing others to bear witness to our journey's and experiences frees us, empowers us, builds within us a capacity for understanding, navigating, creativity.

In this posture of prayer we are healing, transforming and enabling a new reality to emerge—we are resisting and we are creating.

It takes tremendous vulnerability and faith, but it is here that the work of this season happens, as we await the coming of the baby Jesus, as we celebrate the advent of Emmanuel, God here with us, ushering in love

Let us pray

NRSV Isaiah 6:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

<sup>2</sup> <sup>[a]</sup> 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!  
<sup>3</sup>When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
<sup>4</sup>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.  
<sup>5</sup>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.<sup>[b]</sup>**  
<sup>6</sup>**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.  
<sup>7</sup>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<sup>[c]</sup> us into the hand of our iniquity.  
<sup>8</sup>Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
<sup>9</sup>Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,  
and do not remember iniquity forever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.