

God in the People: We are the Work of Your Hands
Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians 1:3-9
November 30, 2008

It is a season of growing darkness in our nation as the economic crisis continues to unfold. Anxiety and uncertainty seem to be multiplying, not subsiding. Predictions of recovery seem to be a long way off, with more loss anticipated before the economy turns around. Despair is building in the spirits of many people. We long for an end to this crisis, for a savior to appear and reverse the downward spiral in which we are trapped.

Our longing is not unlike that of the Israelite people centuries ago as they yearn for an end to the exile in which they have been held for many years. They long to return home from Babylon. They ache for light to break forth in the land of darkness. The prophet Isaiah voices their lament, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...to make your name known to your adversaries." They remember the awesome deeds God has done in the past and long for such a marvelous manifestation of God's presence, in spite of all the ways in which they have turned away from God. Isaiah recognizes that perhaps they are experiencing the absence of God as a consequence of their own rebellion against God.

Isaiah concludes this passage by reminding God and the people, saying, "Nevertheless, in spite of all that has transpired, you are still our Father, Lord. We are merely clay in the hands of the potter. You have fashioned and formed us; we belong to you." The bond between the Divine Parent and the children of God will never be broken. They can trust that God will come down and restore their hope and their lives.

The promise that God will never abandon us is passed on to us as well. Light will dawn into our increasing darkness. The companionship of God will be renewed. God will tear open the heavens and come down. The four weeks of Advent are the time when we get in touch with our longing for God's presence in our lives. Perhaps we have absented ourselves from God. Maybe we have an intellectual concern, such as the relationship between science and religion, which has caused us to doubt the existence of God. It is easy to get caught up in the consumerist mentality and seek to find pleasure and meaning in material goods and abandon the spiritual quest. As the song we sang earlier says, "God is here today." Oftentimes it is we who fail to recognize God. This Advent season we will consider various ways in which God comes to us and is with us.

Today we reflect on God's coming through people. That's the message of Christmas itself: God became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus embodied God's very essence. A cynic once said, "God is love, but get it in writing." Christ is how we get God's love in writing. Jesus Christ is the very fingerprint of God.

Since Jesus was human as are we, there is the possibility that we have a spark of God's presence in us as well. Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Most of us are fully human and growing in divinity. As Isaiah notes, "We are the clay, and God is our potter; we are all the work of God's hand." The fingerprints of God are imprinted on our very being. God has lovingly and uniquely fashioned each of us.

Steven Curtis Chapman wrote a song called, "Fingerprints of God." The lyrics are, "I can see the fingerprints of God when I look at you; I can see the fingerprints of God and I know it's true. You're a masterpiece that all creation quietly applauds and you're covered with the fingerprints of God."ⁱ

I've experienced a few break-ins at various churches. When the police come, they dust the areas where intruders were active in order to get good fingerprints to identify the burglars. Frequently they find it difficult to get a good print that is large enough and clear enough for identification purposes. It makes me wonder, "If God came and dusted me seeking God's fingerprints, would they be clearly found in my life, imprinted on my behavior, etched into my soul, or would God find only a partial print that is smudged and unclear?"

A significant part of being the people of God is allowing God to be active in our lives. It involves yielding our own wills to the will of God. It is easy for us to become so rigid in our attitudes that we resist the active presence of God in our lives. If we truly believe that God is active today through the Holy Spirit, God may be revealing a new perspective to us, calling us forward into some new way of looking at life. If we are hardened in place, we are not flexible enough for the fingerprint of God to be imprinted on our soul. We can easily get stuck in thinking that God will work in certain ways, especially the ways we wish. Oftentimes we aren't open to the fresh ways in which God may be addressing us. As clay in the potter's hand, our role is to be soft and pliable so that God can mold and shape us as God desires. For some of us this will mean releasing our hold on control because things won't be happening in the way we want. But if we truly trust in God and yield ourselves to God's will, we know that God will not steer us into trouble.

As we allow the fingerprints of God to be engraved in our lives, others will notice. In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul affirms the grace of God that is visible in the lives of these Christians. God's fingerprint is recognizable in their speech and knowledge and in the variety of spiritual gifts given to them. Paul celebrates the fact that the light of Christ shines through their lives and works. The spark of the Divine within them glows for others to see, that they might be pointed toward God, the source of the Light within.

We often see God at work in the lives of other persons, just as God was fully at work in the life of Jesus Christ. They need not be people of extraordinary accomplishment with world renown. More often they are the ordinary saints of our lives through whom the light of God shines. The fingerprint of God is manifested in a variety of ways. One person sees a need and takes action to meet it. Another writes notes expressing appreciation for ministry in the congregation. Someone recognizes a downcast spirit and offers a listening ear. God often uses us as instruments of God's healing presence in the world. You and I can name people through whom God has spoken to us, those who have been mediators of God's love in our lives.

God is also found in the most unexpected places. Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest and professor at Yale, then Harvard. His continual prayer was to follow Jesus wherever Jesus led. He sensed Jesus calling him from academia to the community of L'Arche, a network of homes where mentally handicapped people live together. In our culture we would consider that a move of downward mobility. However, it proved to be a spiritually enriching experience for Henri. Among the ways he grew in this community of developmentally disabled adults was "a call to a greater purity of heart." He wrote, "Jesus speaks through the broken hearts of the handicapped, who are considered marginal and useless. But God has chosen them to be the poor through whom he makes his presence known. This is hard to accept in a success- and production-oriented society."ⁱⁱ

Oftentimes we need to slow down in order to appreciate the simple wonders of life. In rushing toward upward mobility, we often overlook the ways in which God is revealed. In our narrow-mindedness, we fail to see manifestations of God's presence in ways we do not anticipate. The developmentally disabled residents with whom Henri lived taught him the joy of

a noncompetitive life, the hospitality of welcoming another regardless of name or prestige, and the blessing of simply “wasting some time” in the presence of another human being. Even through these who are marginalized and considered useless, he found the fingerprint of God.

This Advent season I challenge us to pay more attention to God’s presence in our own lives and in the lives of others. We need not fall into the despair of the darkness that threatens us. In faith we can yield ourselves to the Master Potter, open to having the divine fingerprints of God shine more clearly in our lives, our attitudes, our behaviors, and our values. In offering ourselves as vessels for the light of God, light will be shed in the midst of the darkness that surrounds us. Let us slow down and attend to the grace of God that is present in the people around us, even in those who are most difficult and challenging. We are all the work of God’s hand. The divine fingerprint is embedded on all of us. Let us look with wonder at the gifts of God given one another.

In attending to God’s presence in one another, we may find ways to offer the most meaningful gifts of all: a written note of appreciation, a photograph of a memorable occasion, the ministry of our presence to one in need of companionship, a word of encouragement. As we see and affirm the fingerprints of God in one another, the glow of God’s fingerprint in us also grows.

ⁱ Steven Curtis Chapman, *Speechless* CD, Sparrow Song 1999.

ⁱⁱ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 19.

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