

Celebrate Advent and Christmas with Bishop Laurie Haller – Week One: Prayers

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It's a time of expectation and waiting for Jesus to be born once again into our world and in our hearts. I would like to read to you from the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, chapter 64.

- ¹ If only you would tear open the heavens and come down!
Mountains would quake before you
- ² like fire igniting brushwood or making water boil.
If you would make your name known to your enemies,
the nations would tremble in your presence.
- ³ When you accomplished wonders beyond all our expectations;
when you came down, mountains quaked before you.
- ⁴ From ancient times,
no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any god but you
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him!
- ⁵ You look after those who gladly do right;
they will praise you for your ways.
But you were angry when we sinned;
you hid yourself when we did wrong.
- ⁶ We have all become like the unclean;
all our righteous deeds are like a menstrual rag.
All of us wither like a leaf;
our sins, like the wind, carry us away.
- ⁷ No one calls on your name;
no one bothers to hold on to you,
for you have hidden yourself from us,
and have handed us over to our sin.
- ⁸ But now, LORD, you are our father.
We are the clay, and you are our potter.
All of us are the work of your hand.
- ⁹ Don't rage so fiercely, LORD;
don't hold our sins against us forever,
but gaze now on your people, all of us:
This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

What is it that holds us together as people called United Methodist? It is a set of spiritual practices that center around the membership vows we take as we join the church. Whenever new members are received, the congregation says, "As members together with you in the body of Christ and in this congregation of The United Methodist Church, we renew our covenant to faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness?" Over the next five weeks, I will be exploring each of those spiritual practices.

As we begin the season of waiting called Advent, you and I live under incredible stress, including COVID-19; a country in transition as a new president has been elected; a rising up as we struggle and learn together what it means to be anti-racist; widespread unemployment and economic hardship; and a denomination that has unresolved tensions around human sexuality.

It's not unlike the time 2500 years ago when the prophet Isaiah was speaking to the people of Judah. After they returned to Palestine in 539 B.C. after 50 years of exile in Babylon, life was very harsh for the returning exiles, and there was conflict over the rebuilding of the temple.

In this prayer, Isaiah begs God to descend in power and majesty as in the days of old at the Exodus. He says to God, "You did awesome deeds that we did not expect," "making your name known to your adversaries." Then he admits the reality of Israel's life. "You meet those who gladly do right. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed."

Isaiah is well aware of the sin of Israel, but he waffles between accusing God of hiding God's face and unjustly condemning Israel and, on the other hand, recognizing that Israel herself continues to forsake God. Then we get to verse eight. Yet. Yet. Despite Isaiah's despair at Israel's sin, he prays, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter." The appeal is for God not to destroy what God has made. "God, you made us, for you are our Parent and our Potter."

One of my favorite Bible verses is Romans 12:2 in the Phillips version where the apostle Paul says, "Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its mold." We are experiencing the same uncertainty today. In the midst of our divisions, might the love of God in Jesus Christ be renewed and experienced in us and for the world, by a renewal of the spiritual practices of prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness?

Whom are you willing to allow to mold you? Who or what is shaping your life? In this season of waiting, are you willing to be as patient as the potter? Will you allow God to shape you into an instrument of grace and shalom? How might our world be changed if your prayer this Advent season were for reconciliation, forgiveness, and hope?

Remember, God did tear open the heavens and come down by sending God's own son Jesus into our world. Why? To do hands-on molding. All of this molding has a purpose. God wants to form us into something useful. God shapes us so that we can reshape our world.

Let us pray.

(Singing) Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!

Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.

Mold me and make me after Thy will,

While I am waiting, yielded and still.