

WHEN GOD ISN'T HERE

November 27, 2011

In America's great cities, the traditional temple of Christmas magic is the department store. And what magic it is! How it makes the eyes of children sparkle in anticipation with its animated windows, and the Trim-a-Tree Shop, and the Toyland and, of course, the throne room where Santa himself holds audiences for those children and hears what it is they want this year for Christmas.

The traditional department store: America's great cities all have one. So let's see how good you are. I'll name a city and you tell me the store. Minneapolis...Dayton's, exactly. Detroit...(From Michigan, Courtney, and you don't know?)...Hudson's, exactly. Chicago...Marshall Field's – a big answer! How about Seattle? Nordstrom...what else? The Bon Marché. St. Louis...yes, Famous-Barr, very good. And New York City...Macy's. Macy's: that magical department store that became the setting for one of the greatest Christmas classics ever produced: *Miracle on 34th Street*.

Now all of those stores that you just named...Macy's now owns each one. And, for this 2011 version of Christmas magic, Macy's has given us a one-word theme. Do you know what it is? **Believe!** That's the theme for this Macy's Christmas: **Believe!**

But in what shall we believe? Shall we believe in the Christmas spirit? Shall we believe in the joy of giving and receiving? Shall we believe in festive gatherings of family and friends? Shall we believe in a month-long feast of food and drink? Shall we believe in the intoxicating twinkle of sparkling lights and evergreen boughs; lights and evergreen laced with tinsel and tied up with bows of satin and gold? What shall we believe in?

Perhaps we might believe in the almighty goodness of God; God's goodness that will turn every wrong to right and fill every grief with comfort and peace. For this month between Thanksgiving and December 26th, believing the magic of this season of overstimulation lets us escape, at least for a little while, from the brokenness of our world and the pain of our lives. **Believe!**...between Thanksgiving and December 26th.

There is a day not quite at the end of that time period: December 21st. Have you heard about December 21st? Do you know what the significance is of December 21st? Michael? Exactly! Thank you! Michael's right. It's the latest prediction for Doomsday! December 21st...so we're not going to get to Christmas, folks! You can stop worrying. December 21st is the latest Doomsday prediction.

Now you know some people spend their time prognosticating about when that's going to happen...when the world's going to end. And, you know, we've approached and gone past a number of those predictions. When will the world end? And we think about that, and some people worry about that. Yet, you know, for countless thousands who have no food...for those who are persecuted by war and devastated by raging disease...the world ends today.

Sometimes we spend our time worrying about weight-loss and aerobic exercise – especially after this month-long feast – so that we can tone our bodies and reclaim our health. Or maybe we worry about Facebook and the posts that are posted there, and social events that give our lives

some semblance of meaning. Yet, for countless thousands for whom life is lost to loneliness and bodies have become prisons, life ends today.

In this season that begins with the material extravagance of Black Friday and Cyber Monday, dare we ask: *Where is God? Where is God?*

Listen to the 80th Psalm. The psalmist writes:

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, (that is, listen to me Shepherd of Israel!) you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth (yes, I said, Shine forth!) before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

Where are you God? That's what the psalmist asks.

You know, there was a time when God made a great dramatic display of God's might and power. After three and a half years of drought, the prophet Elijah, who had proclaimed the drought because of a disobedient Israel, declared a contest between the almighty God and Ba'al. And on Mount Carmel that contest unfolded: one prophet of God – Elijah – against 450 priests of Ba'al. And all day the priests of Ba'al tried to make fire come down from heaven, and they did not succeed. But with a word, Elijah made fire come down from heaven, and it consumed everything on and including the altar. Elijah did it...and Israel remembered it...and Isaiah wrote about it.

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!

You did it on Mount Carmel, God! When are You going to do it again? When You did awesome deeds we did not expect, You came down. The mountains quaked at Your presence... and Lord our God, they've been silent for too long. *Where are you, God?* That's what Isaiah asks. How shall we live where God is not? How can we live when God isn't here?

The prophet Elijah directed one of the most dramatic displays of God's might in all of scripture. And then, because the queen said *You're in trouble with me, Elijah!*, Elijah fled from Queen Jezebel all the way to Horeb, the mountain of God. And there, Elijah met God. But when Elijah met God at Horeb, God was not in the power of the wind. Nor was God in the might of the earthquake. And God was not in the conflagration of the fire. No, for Elijah on Mount Horeb, God was in a voice of sheer silence.

Sometimes we do ignore God...sometimes we do rebel against God...sometimes the arrogance of our own wealth and cunning convinces us that life really is in our control...that it's all about us and we don't need God. But there are those times, friends, when God simply seems to have disappeared...when all we can do is watch, and wait, and trust that God will show up and do for us what God has promised, and that God will wrap us up – yes, God will show up and wrap us up in the redeeming power of life, and health, and salvation.

Sometimes all we can do is wait and watch and trust. As the Apostle Paul invited the church at Corinth to trust...as the Apostle Paul gave his confident promise to that fledgling church...so Paul invites us:

God will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (And then these great words:) God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

God is faithful. God is faithful...even when the evidence denies it. **God is faithful...**even when nothing good seems to be happening around us. **God is faithful...**even when God's voice is the voice of sheer silence.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus says that, when the world is falling apart, when nothing makes any sense anymore and our lives are riddled with doubt and pain, God is standing at the door.

So be alert, says Jesus. Keep awake...for you don't know when the master will come: in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn because, if you don't stay awake, then He may find you asleep and you'll miss His coming.

Can you see God coming? Can you see God in the evening? Remember, it was in the evening that Jesus ate His last supper with His disciples. ***Can you see God at midnight?*** Remember, it was at midnight that Jesus was arrested by the servants of the high priest and Peter denied Him three times. ***Can you see God at cockcrow?*** Remember, it was at the dawn that Peter's denial of Jesus literally came home to roost. ***Can you see Jesus in the morning...***when Jesus is condemned and crucified?

Where is God?

Elie Wiesel in his timeless book, *Night*, wrote of his experience as a concentration camp victim as a child. He said:

Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were hanging out, swollen and bluish. But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing... And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "For God's sake, where is God?" And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where is He? This is where--hanging here from this gallows..."

Beneath all the sparkle, and all the dazzle, and all the glitter of this season...in the brokenness of human lives...in the emptiness of human hearts...in the utter desperation of human grief, God is here: in the voice of sheer silence...in the whisper of the angels...in the borning cry in Bethlehem...God is here.

So listen...and watch...and wait. Yes, the Shepherd will stir up His might and come to save us. God will tear open the heavens and come down.

God is faithful! God is faithful! Yes, God is faithful! So say it, even when you really don't believe it. Say it, when those words are more about convincing yourself and persuading God than they are about confessing a truth that you believe deep in your hearts. **God is faithful!**

And then listen...and watch...and wait...not for the miracle of Christmas magic on 34th Street...but for the miracle of Christian faith in each of our hearts...the miracle of God's love that does tear open the heavens and come down in a manger...the One who guards us and guides us like a Shepherd, even when our way leads straight through the valley of the shadow of death...the One whose voice is the voice of sheer silence...Jesus Christ our Lord. As Macy's said it so unwittingly well: ***Believe! Believe!*** Amen.

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Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2011