



God in Chaos
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
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I am the first of five siblings and I have various recollections of what it meant to be waiting for a birth...at 14-month-old...4-year-old...9...and 11.

At 14 months, I had no clue that my parents welcomed another child into our family; I was way too young to understand what that meant and don't have any recollection of the chaos and stress that the new baby brought into our young family.

Even at 4, I did not understand what it meant that my mother's large belly was going to soon be transformed into another sibling for me. I thought at first that it was just fine that a new baby suddenly appeared in my mother's arms. Only now in retrospect, I imagine that event caused me to experience much distress as I was slowly losing the central place of honor, and the spotlight along with my parents' attention was being redirected towards my little brother. I guess I didn't like that my parents' energy was now being divided among three children. A clue that I must have felt that way comes from my parents' half scared and half humorous recollection of when they found out I gave my younger sister a haircut. As we grew older, I was particularly mean to my sister with terrible teasing and practical jokes.

It is often the case that we are not aware of the impact of our choices and actions on others. We seem to have no clue how bad things are for people until we get personally involved. With the availability of news from around the world we are quickly made aware of the extreme life conditions and traumas of millions of people, from refugees in Eastern Europe to the refugees at our Southern border; from a civil war in Ethiopia to a coup-d'état in Sudan; from competing drug cartels' fighting in Colombia to the fights in our school boards and the murders in the streets of our cities. Knowledge of facts doesn't necessarily translate into compassion. Often, the news is delivered to set us up for an anger response and solicit our version of righteousness. Anger draws on more anger, and our inability to change the situation spirals into helplessness and depression.

By the time I was 9, I couldn't wait for the fourth child to be born. The months seemed to drag on while I delighted myself in the delusional fantasy of engaging my latest sibling with our toy soldiers or with the unrealistic thought that we would soon gain another playmate for our soccer games. How true it is that expectations are so self-centered and can be projected on others with no questioning doubt that others may be unwilling, unable, or simply uninterested to comply. I was stunned to learn that the newborn child was a girl. I had to say "Goodbye" to my dreams of increasing our family soccer team. I soon realized that I did not have the power to turn my wish into a concrete reality. I needed to learn how to accept and adjust to a new reality without making faces.

But how easy it is to make faces and react with cynicism to realities we do not like or the chaos we do not understand even as adults. As we ponder the uptake of authoritarian regimes around the world, or consider our justice system, our immigration laws, our policing, and even our church life, do we feel helpless, disgruntled, uninspired? Do we hope for a better tomorrow or is it merely wishful thinking? Is there any indication our engagement in life will bring any fruit? Is there any hope to rise from the ashes of brokenness and the chaos of a failed humanity? Where can we find the strength and the compassion to respond to our suffering and the suffering of the world and move from wishful thinking to concrete hope?

How does our faith sustain us in the midst of the unresolved matters of our heart? Does our faith make any difference? And what do we mean by “faith”?

Or maybe we do not see all that; maybe we do not think there is anything wrong with the way of the life we have created and struggle to understand why some people can't adapt and fall in line.

By the time my parents' fifth baby was due I was eleven. I understood a little more and nine months seemed rather long. I was aware of the age gap and was not creating unreasonable expectations for the soon to be born baby. I was a professional older brother now ready for more mature undertakings: was this the beginning of a journey towards a duty-bound adult life? Was there any hope of a common worry-free childhood? Would we share the same interest for the same toys or games? The age gap made sure we stayed in our respective worlds, and it became soon evident that we would hardly build any substantial childhood memory. He was merely 9 when I left home for the seminary as a young man. Even today the geographical distance is so great we can only update each other on our families a few times a year by phone. I wish it were different but how do we turn wishful thinking into real hope?

It helps me to think of wishful thinking as something I do in a passive mode as in “I wish things were different.” But I am doing anything constructive to induce a different outcome? Hope, instead, is different. It requires my active participation and a different attitude.

The word “advent” comes from the Latin “to come.” The Christian Church celebrates the second coming of Christ when the world will be restored to the right relationship with God and the whole world will know the salvation planned by God from the beginning of creation.

Now, that will sound as wishful thinking to many, a good tale for children and simpletons. But for those who have a relationship of trust with the Lord, his coming is certain just as certain are all the promises God has fulfilled: our God is trustworthy. God's involvement in our life only requires an open heart and open eyes. God is ready to bless abundantly those who are open to receive. The current brokenness of the world will not persevere: the good news - however slow - is coming. Reformed theologian Jurgen Moltmann affirms that the Christian hope is the divine power that makes us alive in the world.¹

¹ J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*

The gospel paradox is the invitation to trust the suffering and crucified Messiah, Christ. We are invited to trust a God who is willing to save by embracing in Jesus the suffering of the world. God is neither distant nor unconcerned with our suffering. God is with us and for us all the way through suffering and death. When the world seems to be coming to an end, we are reminded that our God is faithful and will not fall short on promises.

This is how God intends to fulfill the promise made through the prophet Jeremiah: an offspring of David will bring “justice and righteousness in the land.” Jeremiah’s world is in a state of collapse. Jeremiah himself is in prison for preaching that God would deliver the kingdom into the hands of the Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, for their failure to keep the covenant with Yahweh. There will be a day when chaos, violence, exile, and estrangement from God will be no more.

But the people will have to learn to trust Yahweh. This seems to be clear from the first pages of the book of Jeremiah. God’s vision is clearly stated in the prophet’s call.² There will be a time “to build and to plant” but not before the prophet has spoken words of reproach meant “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow.” Notice how there are four “negative” verbs and two “positive” ones. Israel will have to go through loss and Jeremiah himself will go through harassment and persecution. But God can be found in all circumstances for those who know how to see. Sometimes we need to go through a period of grief before we can experience renewal. And we need not to fear loss for God is present in the whole ordeal even when the world seems to be coming to an end.

Sometimes, we only want to hear what is pleasant to our ears and want to see only what aligns with our understanding. Sometimes we are afraid of chaos and loss and consider those to be avoided at all cost. During this time of Advent, instead, let us grow in our trust in God who is present also in what looks and feels unbearable. Let us do faithful works of justice on hope and with hope. Christ is coming. Amen.

² Jeremiah 1:4-10