

The Opening of the Heavens
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
First Sunday in Advent
Nov. 27, 2011
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9

Since the beginning, humanity has looked to the heavens for new answers, new understanding and new hope.

Astrology, the study of the stars, stands as the oldest of all the natural sciences. Beginning as early as 3,500 AD, a range of ancient civilizations around the world began charting movements of the stars. Stonehenge is just one example of those efforts to decode the heavens.

The writers of Genesis did their best to understand Earth's celestial origins, expressing in Genesis that the Earth was void and without form before God moved over the waters. Centuries later, Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo were branded heretics for stating that the Earth circles the Sun and not the other way around. In our time, Einstein's theory of relativity unlocked still new realms of understanding and possibility.

Many of us grew up in the time of the space race and the excitement and danger of the Apollo program. Our children have grown up knowing the same drama through the recently concluded space shuttle program.

From crude telescopes to radio waves to today's most sophisticated use of the study of light, from X-rays to Gamma rays, scientists have continued to advance our understanding of our place in the cosmos.

Today, thanks to the Hubble Telescope, anyone can jump on the internet and see further into space than ever. The photo on the cover of today's worship bulletin is just one of thousands of mesmerizing photos the Hubble gives us.

As far as we have come, most scientists and astronomers readily concede we are still in the early stages of discovery. World-changing questions remain: What was the origin of the universe? Is there life elsewhere in the cosmos? Will the end come one day when the universe eventually freezes over? Or will the universe one day collapse back in on itself, a theory known as the Big Crunch that brings the universe full circle from the Big Bang that created it?

Since the beginning, humanity has looked to the heavens for new answers, new understanding and new hope. So it is with us. So it was with the nation of Israel in the middle of the 6th century AD.

In 568 AD, to be exact, the Babylonians defeated God's chosen people and drove Israel out of its beloved promised land. For a generation, Israel was left disoriented, separated from all that was familiar, including their temple and their God.

The prophet Isaiah gave voice to the people of Israel and that voice reaches its height of urgency in today's reading from the 64th chapter. Our modern-day exploration of theology, has been dubbed "faith seeking understanding." But in these verses, Israel's plea is far more emotional and raw, a soul-wrenching lament that one writer has called "pain seeking understanding."

"Pain seeking understanding." That's a powerful and penetrating idea, isn't it? From the first time an infant child feels physical pain, it cries out, at once expressing its hurt and seeking the cause. The rest of our growing up years are spent trying to the same connection: What causes the pain we feel? If we fell and skinned our knee or got too close to a hot oven burner, we sought to understand what caused the pain.

Then we applied the conscious knowledge of the physical to the emotional. Perhaps we were shunned by others on the playground or let down by our first love or abandoned by an adult or worse. Whatever our pain has been, we can connect on at least some level with what Isaiah is expressing in his lament. We might express our feelings in these questions:

"You have always been there for me, O God, so why do you hide yourself from me now?"

Why did this happen, God?

How could you let this happen, God?

Where were you when I needed you, God?

Or, perhaps God, is this thing that has happened to me a result of something I did?

Am I accountable in this? Is my sin blinding me from something you have for me to see or to learn, O Creator?"

Speaking for Israel, the prophet Isaiah expressed all those emotions and more in today's verses. What was once an intimate relationship between God and God's chosen people hung in the balance in those years of exile. Israel recognized its sin in one verse ... then blamed God for hiding in the next ... and then came around again to confessing its sins and its hope.

"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.”

“Yet, O lord, you are our parent; we are the clay and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.”

These words stick inside us. They prick our souls because they are true, aren't they? Isaiah's portrait of Israel fits.

It fits us as a nation that has wandered too far from our role - inside and outside of our borders - as a model of fairness and equality and justice for all. It fits us as individuals, as those who know we fall short of what God in Christ instructed. It fits us as church universal that has spent too much time on in-fighting, self-service and institutional preservation and not nearly enough learning what Christ said and seeking to be the hands and feet of Christ, whatever that may require.

Perhaps you are sitting there thinking this is not at all what you came here expecting. After all, we are still polishing off our Thanksgiving leftovers. Santa Clause is back to reign over the Christmas shopping season. Black Friday came and, thank God, it went. So, buy the tree and get out the decorations. Hang out the mistletoe. Buy some new outfits for the holiday parties. Let the bells toll out - it's Christmas!

But here we are, dwelling on Israel's cry of anguish and confession of sin. If you are thinking this is not necessarily what you thought you signed up for, you are not alone.

“It is a strange way to begin this time of Advent,” writes Patricia de Jong, a Congregationalist preacher in Berkeley, California. “Beginning Advent with weeping and lament? That is unusual!” she says.

“And powerful,” she continues. “This is where we need to begin. The coming of Advent jolts the church out of Ordinary Time with the invasive news that it's time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness.”

And how does Isaiah express that desire for Israel? From whence did he say Israel's salvation would come? Hear again Isaiah's opening line in today's reading.

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

Since the beginning, humanity has looked to the heavens for new answers, new understanding and new hope. So it was with the nation of Israel in the middle of the 6th century AD. So it is with Caldwell church on this first day of a new church

year.

Today opens a new liturgical year for the Church. The liturgical year begins every year with the start of Advent. We begin by actively anticipating the birth of Christ, Emanuel, God with us, God almighty come into our fractured, limping world to heal us and to save us from ourselves.

How do we prepare in our hearts and our souls for such an event? Well, that is where the church calendar - the liturgical calendar - can be of great help. Through its own seasons, rhythms and festivals, the church calendar equips us to reclaim time, in a sense. To wrench the rhythms and movements of our lives out of the grip of the secular, commercial calendar that rushes breathlessly from one opportunity for distraction to the next.

So today, we can turn to the person on our left and our right and wish them a "Happy New Year." Go ahead, let's take a moment to do that.

And what might God's people do on the first Sunday of a new year in God's time and in the grip of God's abiding love? How about we do nothing, nothing, that is, except to anticipate? How about we wait and we watch and we actively anticipate the coming of our Lord.

That is the purpose for which these four weeks of Advent are set aside. Waiting. Watching. Anticipating. Preparing for the tearing open of the heavens and the visitation of our creator who came in flesh and blood and lived among us, who gave an only son to die for us to show us how deep, endless and unconditional divine love really is. While the world around us rushes headlong into Christmas, the church calendar reminds us that the season of Christmas doesn't actually begin until the 25th, the day it ends for those who know nothing else.

What if? What if we resolved this year to wait and to watch and to anticipate the birth of hope for all of humanity, the tearing open of the heavens?

That kind of spiritual discipline and devotion offers even deeper meaning for us at Caldwell this year. We look ahead to an exciting time in the life of this reborn congregation with the unlikeliest of stories. Next year is, of course, our Centennial Year.

Many of you have been at work for some time to engage our many ministries in that celebration. From Worship to Fellowship to Missions and Justice and beyond, we will take time to say thanks for the gift of the last century and the next. In various ways, we hope to divide the year into three parts.

First, we will look back at the last century - asking what has taken place in the life of Christianity in the world and our nation and our city, the life of Protestantism and Presbyterianism and the life this particular church? We will do so with an

honest and objective eye and a humble prayer that we might learn.

Second, we will take account of where we are as a reborn church community, still taking some of our first steps together. Third, we will look ahead, prayerfully and obediently, to discern where God might direct us as a church with such remarkable opportunities to love God by loving neighbor.

All of that deserves our active anticipation as well doesn't it? How many times in our life will we be given the chance to celebrate a centennial, much less one as hopeful as this one, much less with such loving, sincere and committed people as make up this church family.

Since the beginning, humanity has looked to the heavens for new answers, new understanding and new hope. So it was with the nation of Israel in the middle of the 6th century AD. So it is with the Church Universal every Advent. So it is with Caldwell church on this first day of a new year in God's time.

So let our prayer today be Isaiah's prayer:

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

Come down, O Lord, into a world that desperately needs to see your face again.

Come down, O Lord, to renew our faith, heal our wounds and open our hearts to fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness.

Tear open the heavens, Sovereign Creator, that we might stop and watch and await your command.

We are the clay and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand.

Tear open the heavens, that we might come to a new understanding of the depth of your love and the purpose of our lives.

In the name of Our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, Amen.