

## In What Ways Do We Need Restoration?

The Love that is God gathers us together for a time of reflection on this first Sunday in the season of Advent – a season of hopeful watching for light to break into our lives in new ways. This morning, we wonder with the prophet Isaiah and with the Psalmist: In what ways do we need restoration?

Let's begin with prayer: God of all, may our hearts and minds be radically open move with your Holy Spirit and touch the hurting and resistant parts of our lives. Restore us, we pray. Amen.

As we enter the season of Advent, we look for God's transforming presence among us. We observe realities and ask: where is God in all of it? And where is God as soldiers and civilians die in armed conflicts all over the world today? And where is God when so many of our neighbors go to sleep tonight without adequate housing? And where is God as our family members and friends and we ourselves suffer with addiction, chronic physical and mental illness, bullying and discrimination, financial debt, and grief? We long to know that God is with us, and we would rather not have to wait any length of time for God's presence to be revealed and felt by us.

We've heard the Psalmist's refrain: "*Restore us, O Holy One; let your face shine upon us, teach us to love!*" Restore, shine, teach. Here are a few synonyms for the word restore: reestablish, renovate, repair, rebuild. **I wonder: what situation or relationship in your life most needs restoration?** Perhaps it is intimate and personal. Perhaps it is a systemic situation – a web of relationship that expands far beyond you but to which you know you are connected.

**What hurting relationship or situation do you value enough to go through the long, slow, humbling and transformative work of restoration?**

The Psalmist wrote these words during a refugee crisis. *“Restore us, O Holy One; let your face shine upon us, teach us to love!”* It was the eighth century BCE, the Assyrian army had attacked the northern kingdom of Israel, and people had fled to the southern kingdom of Judah where Jerusalem is located. The tone of this psalm is one of lament mixed with trust. We heard, *“In your steadfast Love, You weep with our tears, tears that rise from fear, doubt, and illusion.”*

Let’s keep pondering where we are each longing for restoration.

Theologian Charles L. Aaron Jr. poses these questions: *“How do we hope God will act? How might we tell if God’s face is shining in our midst? Would the difference be in our circumstances or within us?”* Aaron asks.

Today’s reading from Isaiah was written in the sixth century BCE (so, two centuries later). The Babylonian army had attacked Jerusalem and forced the people to migrate to a far-away land. Only a few were left behind in Jerusalem. Most had struggled to build new lives in captivity while longing to return home. In the setting of today’s reading, the Persian king had released Jerusalemites from captivity in Babylon. They had begun returning home to Jerusalem, the center of their civilization. They knew what awaited them—the ruined remains of the holy city that had been attacked twice and left in ruins fifty years earlier. The people of Israel longed for an immediate manifestation of God’s presence within their stark and overwhelming need to rebuild their community after its complete devastation.

We heard: *“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence... to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!”*

The people sought a tangible display of power from God. They instinctively assumed that they would only feel God’s presence if God acted with as much magnitude of force as they had experienced at the hands of the army that had destroyed their city.

In the midst of their plea for a magnificent revelation, the people began to remember how God had touched their lives in the past. They first remembered the larger-than-life stories inherited from their ancestors (ancestors who had experienced deliverance from slavery under the leadership of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam). They said: *“When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down... From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for God.”*

Many of us can relate to how the people enjoyed recounting the stories of their ancestors, deriving from them meaning and courage for living their own lives. But then, in a move to the present tense, the people voiced recognition of God’s presence with them in that very moment as they stood in the burnt ruins of Jerusalem: *“You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.”*

A simple yet powerful shift occurred in their conversation with God. Their plea for God to reveal Godself magnificently had led them to reminisce about God’s companioning presence in the past, and reminiscing helped them to recognize how God was with them in the present as well.

Perhaps they felt God meeting with them as families managed to reunite along the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. Perhaps some families felt God's presence when they managed to locate particular ruins that they knew for certain were the remains of their home.

I am struck by this concept of God meeting with those who remember God's ways. **I wonder: Do we make enough space within our individual lives to remember God's ways—to wait for Love and notice as Love meets with us? When have you recently experienced God's Love meeting with you in small ways—restoring, rebuilding your spirit?**

Through an unexpected call or letter from a friend, positive feedback at school or work, a long-awaited good night of sleep, or an energizing conversation with a new friend? Here at St. Croix United Church, I experience God meeting with me during our sharing of the peace and our singing together – feeling God's touch through your touch, seeing God's smile in your smiles, hearing God's voice in your voices. I experience God meeting with me during fellowship time – sensing God's loving energy in the hum of new and old friends connecting with one another, finding joy in each other's company. And I experience God meeting with me during adult faith conversations – in the listening space we hold for taking in one another's insights.

God meets with us daily in many small ways. However, like our ancestors in faith, we sometimes long to experience God's presence in large and magnificent ways. Might such prayers prevent us from experiencing restoration of our spirits through noticing God meeting with us in the smaller everyday ways? What behaviors move us toward meeting with God?

The community about whom Isaiah wrote finally stepped toward God in humility, through confession.

We heard: *“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. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you...”*

These words remind me of experiences with loved ones in which I have admitted to acting in a hurtful way, asked for forgiveness, and received forgiveness. Entering into those conversations can feel scary, but they can ultimately restore and strengthen our relationships. When such necessary conversations do not occur, a relationship can begin to feel like the words of the prophet: *“filthy,” “fading like a leaf,” “carried away on the wind to die.”* If repentance and forgiveness between human beings can enrich and sustain relationships, how much more must confession before God within us bring us restored faith in God’s active presence in our lives and in God’s desire to meet with us? Confession feels vulnerable, and vulnerability requires humility and trust.

As we enter this Advent season, let’s learn from the people of Israel how to cultivate attitudes of humble trust as we wait for our God to meet with us. The people simply asked God to remember them: *“Yet, O God, you are our Mother and Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O God, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.”*

Through these words, the people voiced recognition of God’s creative, restorative presence in their lives. In regard to God as parent and potter, theologian Scott Bader-Saye writes, *“Neither image suggests a God who would ‘tear open the heavens.’ Instead they evoke a God whose mode of action looks more like that of the artist or the parent than that of the superhero. God forms and shapes the people as a parent over time shapes the character of children, as a potter lovingly molds clay.”*

The act of confession reminded the people that God was present with them implicitly and unconditionally.

Today, God continues to offer us boundless grace. As bearers of God's divine image, we desire to walk in the way of love. As fallible people, we trip, fall, and get messy as we move along the path. As clay in God's hand, we trust that we can approach God and each other in humble repentance when we do trip and fall. Through this cycle of sin (that is, aimlessness), repentance, and grace; we learn that we belong in our Creator God's hands and in community with each other.

In closing, I invite you to hear words of blessing. You might choose to close your eyes if you wish. These words come from Rev. Patricia E. de Jong, a retreat leader and researcher in the areas of spiritual nurture and transformation. May they be a blessing for you as you offer yourself to the work of restoration: *“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. Hope is what is left when your worst fears have been realized and you are no longer optimistic about the future. Hope is what comes with a broken heart willing to be mended. We pray for the hope of Advent: that God will break into the ordinary, bringing the promise of peace, hope, and restored life. So we do not lose heart; rather, we live with our hearts broken open so that compassion, caring and God's reckless love can find a way into our hearts and the heart of the world.”*

Friends in faith: during this Advent season, let us welcome, lean into, and embody God's restorative love. That Love is counting on us.

Amen.