



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

God's Language
The First Sunday of Advent
Sunday, November 29, 2020
The Rev. Paul McLain

'Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.' In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Aaron Kushner was a bright and happy child, who before the age of two could identify a dozen different varieties of dinosaur, and could patiently explain to any adult who would listen to him that dinosaurs were extinct. His parents, Harold and Suzette Kushner, were worried about him because he stopped gaining weight at the age of eight months, and his hair began falling out after he turned one year old. The doctors attached complicated names to his condition and assured the Kushners that Aaron would grow to be very short, but would be normal in all other ways.

When they moved to Boston, they took him to a pediatrician who was doing research in problems of children's growth. Two months later, the day that their daughter Ariel was born, the pediatrician visited Suzette and Harold in the hospital and let them know their son's diagnosis. Aaron had progeria, or rapid aging disease. The pediatrician told them that Aaron would never grow much beyond three feet in height, would have no hair on his head or body, would look like he was a little old man while he was still a child, and would die in his early teens.

At the time, Harold was a young, inexperienced rabbi. He wrote this about what he felt that day: "It didn't make sense. I had been a good person. I had tried to do what was right in the sight of God. More than that, I was living a more religiously committed life than most people I knew, people who had large, healthy families. I believed that I was following God's ways and doing his work. How could this be happening to my family? If God existed, if he was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could he do this to me?"

These questions propelled Rabbi Harold Kushner on a 15-year journey of prayer, study, reflection, wrestling, and writing that culminated in publishing a book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It became a best-seller, but that's not why he wrote it. He wrote it because he knew that he could not restore the life of his son. But he thought the exercise of writing this book might restore his faith in God.

Psalm 80 that the choir chanted a few minutes ago, is also all about the longing for restoration. We do not know exactly when the Psalm was written, but we believe the people of Israel were going through a major disaster, perhaps the conquest of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians. God's chosen people were now scattered slaves and refugees. And, like Rabbi Kushner, they were asking questions, 'Where is God in the midst of this?' 'Why us?' 'Has God forgotten about us or

even abandoned us?' They cry out to God, "Hear us, O Shepherd!" They plead with God, "Stir up your strength and come to help us."

Today marks the beginning of the Season of Advent. It seems strange because, in many ways, it has felt like the Season of Lent for the last 8 months. But this coming of Advent marks the hope of a new church year, and marks a new beginning.

Like Harold Kushner and the people of Israel, we too long for God's presence and saving power. We long for restoration. And, like them, this long season of darkness in our lives has given us a glimmer of vision into who God is and how God works.

Before his son's diagnosis, Rabbi Kushner had seen God as an all-wise, all-powerful distant parent figure who would see to it that we got what we deserve in life. After years of reflection following his son's diagnosis and death, he writes: "I now find God not in the perfection of the world, the intricacies of the rain and sun, growth and healing, the change of seasons and the beauty of leaves in autumn. I find God in the miracle of human resilience in the face of the world's imperfections, even the world's cruelty. Like Job, I have met God. I have met him in the sunshine but more often in the shadows, not in the elegant perfection of the world but in the resilience of the human soul, the ability of people to find a pain-filled life, even a grossly unfair life, worth living. I have met God in the readiness of people to reach out to the afflicted, to salve their wounds not with their doctrines but with their hugs and with their tears."

Rabbi Kushner learned what the people of the Psalm had learned. God restores us, not by some distant directive from the sky, but by encountering us face-to-face and leaning directly into us as we lean directly into God and each other. That is the promise of Advent. God is coming to us as a child. And this child will grow and come to us again and again.

I'm often asked when will the Second Coming of Jesus take place, or has it already taken place, or is it constantly taking place. A more important question is: what is Jesus coming to do? Yes, he is coming to restore us and to save us. But more importantly, he is coming to recondition our hearts. He is coming to invite us to take on his humility as we approach the deepest mysteries of life. He is coming not so much to look back at what was, but to look forward to what can be. He is coming to inspire us to join him in bringing a little more love and light into the world.

Harold Kushner summed up what he learned in his 15-year journey with these words: "God, who neither causes nor prevents tragedies, helps by inspiring people to help. As a 19th century Hasidic rabbi once put it, 'human beings are God's language.' God shows his opposition to cancer and birth defects, not by eliminating them or making them happen only to bad people, but by summoning forth friends and neighbors to ease the burden and to fill the emptiness. We were sustained in Aaron's illness by people who made a point of showing that they cared and understood: the man who made Aaron a tennis racket suitable to his size, and the woman who gave him a small handmade violin that was a family heirloom; the friend who got him a baseball autographed by the Red Sox, and the children who overlooked his appearance and physical limitations to play stickball with him in the backyard, and wouldn't let him get away with anything special. People like that were 'God's language,' God's way of telling us we were not alone."

Over the next four weeks of Advent as we watch and wait and listen and long for the coming Christ, may we not just seek to learn God's language. May we instead find ways to be God's language. *Amen.*