

'The Door to Hope' | Episode 1 | "When Things Falls Apart"

Episode transcript

Some words from the prophet Isaiah that seem to speak to our time: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down. 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, for you have hidden your face from us, and delivered us into the hands of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter. We are all the work of your hands.

This feels like a season, when the world is falling apart. Our political life has fallen into chaos. In the West, we've taken a destructive lurch into division and the demonisation of the other. Everywhere it seems, violence feeds further violence. Israel mourns, and Gaza lies in ruins. It's unbearable to watch children play from our safe distance amidst the missile craters, and listen to their cries and screams for what they've lost.

The earth goes on warming, fueled by our human indifference. We fade like a leaf. We fall into the hands of our own wrongdoing. And where is God in all of this? You have hidden your face. Or is it that we do not attempt to take hold of you? Oh, that you would tear the heavens and come down.

In these last weeks, I have come to see that what's taking place in our world is not so much about presence, but absence. The absence of respect and reverence for the other, the absence of compassion, justice, inclusion, the absence of the lived recognition of our interdependence with one another and with everything that is created. And it's the absence of what should be there that results in things falling apart. The bones need their sinews, the bricks their mortar, the leaves, light and warmth.

I'm reminded of how Julian of Norwich saw human sin as nothing. That is, no thing, the denial of being, the absence of what connects us creatively and compassionately in shared flourishing. Sin, she believed, is serious. Because it is no thing, all falls apart, in the lack of what should be there. No compassion, no honouring of the other, No justice or humility. The leaf fades, the wind takes it away. Oh that you would tear the heavens open, and come down. And come down you did, in a moment of time and place, in the vulnerability of a naked Judean child, and in the full grown, naked man, whose arms were stretched on a cross. And come down, you do, in and beyond time and place, for this time and this place. And if those arms could not hold together what the absence of love and life ripped apart, yet in your dying, lying in the tomb and rising, there was and is presence.

In the face of absence, you are presence. And the Advent season is the dark womb of this presence.

In the Northern Hemisphere, Advent takes place within the season of falling apart. The leaves have faded and wait for the wind to take them away. It's a season with its darkness that might touch into other fallings apart, we've experienced in life, or we know now. The end of a relationship, the loss of one we love, the onset of ill health, the collapse of past certainties, those plans we set ourselves. The disintegration that we experience, when we can no longer manage the events of our lives, or answer the questions that sit in us so uneasily, or know for sure where on earth we are going.

Advent holds the promise of presence, moving into and through this absence. There is a door in the emptiness, and God is always moving through it into this place. What we wait for is also already here and now. The living embodiment of what is missing, and what combined together that which was thrust apart.

A presence that will summon us in our time to live something in the face of no thing. Compassion. Justice. The honouring of the other.

Advent is more, so much more, than a season of the church's year. It draws us into a stance with which, in every season, we can face into life as it is and face into God. It begins with owning how things are. I don't mean by this we spend every waking moment thinking about Gaza or about our own personal challenges.

I'm not sure we could survive that, or that it would help us, or anyone else. It's more that we don't hide or run from the real, as if that was a way of escape. We own our distress, anger, hurt, or fear. And as far as we're able, we let this reality rest in God, rather than pick away at it.

Like the creation story in Genesis, the breath of God is moving over the dark and formless void, moving over and through us too, if we allow this. We are attentive, not only to the void, but to the stirring of the breath of God moving over the water. We wait, letting go our anxious activity, opening ourselves to what comes by gift. We hope, and hope is more than wishful thinking.

It is the awareness of that door, through which God is always stepping into how things are. Compassionately, purposefully, creatively. A door, too, through which we can step once more into all that has fallen apart. The poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, describe the incarnation as riding time, like riding a river, always flowing, to, through, and from us, for we too are what the broken world longs for, the incarnation of presence, for absence. Advent invites us to allow this presence to form in us once more, and then move purposefully, over the darkness and into the void.