

Hineni... the Hebrew word for “Here I am” comes directly before our reading from Isaiah. The speaker using Isaiah as a mouthpiece, asserts that God is here, present, initiating the relationship and offering guidance to the listener.

“remove oppression, false accusation, malicious speech...
bestow bread on the hungry, satisfy the afflicted...then Light will rise
in the darkness.”

We hear that Scripture invites and that God’s Word is relational.

God speaks...we listen.

We speak...God listens. And in the silence that holds the conversation, there is prayer. A dialogue...

Three days a week I work as a catechist with three year olds to 12 year olds in a methodology called the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. The children are in Montessori multi-age groups, 3-6, 6-9 (1st second and third years) and 9-12 (4th through 6th graders). At a particular moment in each community we gather each week to listen to God’s Word, after lighting a candle and stilling our bodies. We enter more deeply into the mystery of relationship.

Have you seen the photos of space captured by the Webb telescope in these past months? They reveal that we are a part of something so much bigger than ourselves. This awakening to our place in history, our place in the plan of God is a part of the work of the 6-9 child. This is examined and researched in timelines and leads to more questions and more wondering. This age child is also a social being, finding their place in the community and developing social skills. One aspect of time together each week is organizing communal prayer. Children sign up, choose a theme, select appropriate scripture readings, songs, and lead their fellow students in the prayer. One week years ago a child with a stutter volunteered to do the reading. Here I must discern what might happen if he could not proclaim the Word. How would his fellow students respond? We took that risk and in a clear voice he read, “A voice cries out in the wilderness, make straight a highway for our God.” No stuttering at all, a clear proclamation, with confidence.

Another child at another time also eager to join his friends in leading communal prayer but a very weak reader, was practicing his text and wanted to rehearse it with me. That day I was the sole catechist and had another small group in the hallway working on a timeline, 50 meters long, reflecting on the history of salvation. He comes to the doorway where I was aiding both groups as needed and read, "Behold and know that I am God, I am exhausted." Trying not to smile, I said, "the word is exalted", and the text proclaims, "I am exalted in the highest heaven, I am exalted over all the earth." We spoke of what exalted means, and he was ready to read during communal prayer. Later in the week I saw him in a school corridor and said, "Behold and know that I am God" and he grinned and said, "I am exalted in the highest heaven. I am exalted over all the earth."

One aspect of this work has been to form other catechists in this method. In 2009 the Missionaries of Charity chose this methodology, not only for their catechetical work in various houses, but also as a part of the formation of their sisters. When asked why they chose this particular catechesis, their response was "contemplation". So I found myself working on a team in Kolkata, India serving a large group of sisters. One meeting, pencils and notebooks ready, they asked many questions of us. My response to one question was, "The most important work you will do is to develop a relationship with each child." Relationship is key.

Here in our community of St. Ignatius, we listen together to God's Word when we gather. At this time the global Church is in the process of a Synod on Synodality, basically travelling together as the People of God, with a focus on communion, participation and mission. Baptism (recall the font has been here before the altar) is our entry point into this community and holds the common thread of our responsibility to build God's kingdom here on earth. At the close of each Eucharist we pray, "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord." Let's go back to Isaiah's words looking at them through the lens of service/mission. Recall that the permanent task of the Church is mission.

Isaiah could well be writing for our times..."Remove oppression"...amid our persons of color and indigenous communities, one experiment is looking at the role of interrupters, whose aim is to prevent violence in neighborhoods. Work to change legislation which discriminates. Reform our criminal justice system. Address racism.

"Malicious speech" we find in news coverage, at political events, in homes and neighborhoods...how do we dialogue with others and move away from polarization?

"Bestow bread on the hungry"... What is our local and global response to the inequity that allows for starvation of some, hunger in others?

"Satisfy the afflicted"...what advocacy work do we engage in to support those on the margins, our indigenous brothers and sisters, the violence done to the planet, our common home.

All are seeking "a hand up, not a handout". We respect the dignity of each individual, build relationships and allow each to be part of creating a solution.

Today we find Jesus, the Word, within this broken world, and he is inviting us (as Isaiah did in his time) to "widen the space of our tent"...as the Webb telescope photos reveal and the language for the Continental phase of the Synod on Synodality declares..."widen the space of our tent."

On October 4, Pope Francis released a film, The Letter. You can access it on YouTube. The filming is beautiful and you meet some of our fellow pilgrims, all working on guarding and maintaining the health of our planet, each on their own continent. Here is a reflection on the importance of relationship both with the natural world and with one another.

A scripture which resonates strongly with me reflects on the prophet, Jeremiah and his relationship with God. In chapter 20, Jeremiah exclaims, "you duped me and I allowed myself to be duped.." I also like the translation, "you seduced me, O Lord, and I allowed myself to be seduced." Jeremiah is reflecting on his relationship with the Lord.

As we move forward to chapter 29, Jeremiah has written a letter to the community in exile in Babylon. He encourages them to promote the welfare of the city, take husbands and wives, bear children, find spouses for your children, plant orchards...(my own interpretation, be an advocate, bring light to this darkness in a foreign land). Then verse 11 rings out to us down across the centuries, "I know well the plans I have in mind for you...plans to give you a future filled with hope."

Our dear Creator, cries out in the Isaiah text, Hineni, "Here I am." I call you "out of darkness into ...wonderful light" 1 Peter 2:9b The call is for us to bear that light, to advocate for others, actively satisfy the afflicted, remove oppression, to bestow bread on the hungry, nurture our planet, insist on affordable housing... What relationships can each of us initiate and/or nurture to be co-creators of that "future filled with hope?"