

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 64: 1-12

Between Isaiah's time and the birth of Jesus, there is a little over five hundred years. At the time of Christ's coming, God's people had been waiting for hundreds of years for God to "rend the heavens and come down," to use the opening words of Isaiah 64. Now it wasn't that God hadn't been working in big ways for Israel. Jerusalem is rebuilt, the people are back in the land after exile. But, they long nonetheless for God to redeem, to regain their former independence and strength.

I emphasize this long trajectory of waiting and yearning that Isaiah foretells and that is still live in figures like John the Baptist out in the wilderness and Simeon and Ana in the temple. We hear that sense of waiting and watching for the signs in our gospel reading. When placed next to their scale, we grow weary and discouraged rather quickly, wouldn't you say? We see events in our own lives and we wonder when God will answer our prayers. We see events in the news, problems that have been going on for decades and centuries. It is easy to lose hope, to lose a real sense of possibility, that God is powerful to act.

Advent is a season of hope, but it is a dogged hope. Avid anticipation despite long stretches of quiet and waiting. It is season when we refuse to stop yearning. In the season of Advent, we are invited to expect again, that God is still at work, still fulfilling a redemptive plan. We called upon to watch and wait, believing that Christ will bring to fulfillment what he started.

The kind of hope that we remember and seek to enact in our lives during Advent is a stubborn one, confident and steadfast. During Advent, our scripture readings typically feature a blend of prophetic anticipation, of watching for signs and signals of God's kingdom coming, of John the Baptist howling in the wilderness and baptizing in the Jordan, and of angels, dreams, shepherds, and a young Mary anticipating a holy birth, the birth of a messiah who would justify all these old hopes and centuries of anticipation, these inspired-dreams.

The hope that we hear in our Isaiah reading is expressed in a time of great discouragement. The book of Isaiah revolves around the period of Exile. The nation centered in Jerusalem is defeated, conquered, many taken off into exile in Babylon. These later chapters of Isaiah are generally considered to be written around the time of the exiles returning to the land. It is a time with the people do not feel like one people, and their land bears the scars of their desolation. You have

cultural differences now between those who have been born and reared in this desolated land of Israel, and those that have been born and reared in Babylon. Their perspectives and customs are all different. And all their sacred spaces and symbols are in ruins. We hear the imagery in this poem about the condition of this sacred landscape:

Your holy cities have become a wilderness,
Zion has become a wilderness,
Jerusalem a desolation.
Our holy and beautiful house,
where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned by fire,
and all our pleasant places have become ruins.

There is a spirit of lament and grief in these words. They are in a time when it feels God's promises are expired, when they have only known God's judgment and displeasure.

In any period of upheaval, we know there is a general inclination to blame somebody, to assign responsibility. As we near an election year, we will hear more than our share of it, each candidate, each political party, assigning blame for our predicaments and problems to their opponents and competitors. But here, and often in the prophets that blame gets turned back on Israel like a mirror. They carry it more like guilt, understanding these events in light of the covenant relationship. That the only explanation for why God would give them into the hands of other nations and let these sacred places be desolated is that they failed, that they were unfaithful to the covenant, that they brought this on themselves; it is the only explanation the prophets can muster, for why God would not have protected and given victory.

But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
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;

And we hear the language of God being angry, and the plea that God would relent and help.

for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

After all this, will you restrain yourself, O LORD?
Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?

Now there is a lot of heaviness going on here. Ruins, trauma, discouragement, guilt, blame. But what is the prophet's response. Appeal, Prayer, hope. Now in the face of such heaviness, many of us would give up hope. It is a lost cause. We grow cynical.

Isaiah's response is: "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down / so that the mountains would quake at your presence." It is a fervent prayer that God would act in dramatic and powerful fashion. It is a persistent hope that God is not done yet, that these discouraging circumstances are not the end of the story. God can still make something of this. Come, "as when fire kindles brushwood / and the fire causes water to boil." Come in power and make things happen.

And in typical fashion the prophet roots this possibility in the fact that God has done it before, God has acted in the past and God might do it again:

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
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 him.

Those who wait for him, trusting that he will hear, he will act, he will rend the long-accepted boundary of heaven and earth, and come down.

And tucked in with all this language of waiting and yearning, of desolation and judgment, is the *metaphor*, the image of the potter molding a mound of unshapen clay into something beautiful and useful. The image of a craftsman who can look at something crude and shapeless and have a vision for it. Like a knitter looking at a pile of colored yarn, or a woodworker eyeing a pile of rough sawn lumber, or a metalworker a piece of hardened iron, or a glassworker a cauldron of molten glass, or a landscaper an overgrown site, or a farmer fallow ground.

It is a powerful metaphor, image. Whatever your craft might be, we know something about having vision and creative possibility for things others might discard and give up on. Hope, like a craftsman. Hope that God our creator is also a redeemer, taking the broken, the burnt, the rubble, and making something new. For despite the imagery of ruins and desolation, we hear, “yet!”

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

God is not done. God is working us in his hands, like a potter working the clay, making something from the raw materials of our lives, our stories, our histories.

We remember these prophetic words in this season because it helps us to situate and understand the significance of Christ’s coming. That God did rend the boundaries that separate God from humans, heaven from earth. God did come down. But unlike the expectation of a great earthquake rattling the mountains and rendering enemy nations with fear, the tremors were more subtle, perceptible to those whose hearts were already poised in a posture of waiting and anticipation, people like Simeon and Ana in the temple, or John the Baptist, or Elizabeth.

And Jesus, in his life and ministry, would embody and enliven that hope that God, the great creator and craftsman, can make something new and beautiful and useful from discarded materials. In fact, Jesus’ years of preparation for ministry were years of being a literal craftsman, working stone and wood from raw materials to final product. And like a craftsman touching the raw materials, what do we hear of Jesus touching throughout the gospel stories? He touches unclean feet. He touches unclean persons, like the leper, like the food offered by women of ill repute. He has a vision for those who are broken, and sinful, and discarded. Like a potter, taking the clay and shaping it into something new and beautiful. What he touches is not the temple, not offices of government and power. He comes not to reclaim a past national glory, but to redeem people, lives, hearts, a new community rooted in his love and grace.

“In Christ *we* are new creations,” Paul says. “the old has gone, the new has come.”

In this season of Advent, we join the likes of Isaiah who are not naïve about the realities of the world, of the brokenness and the need, but who are equally stubborn in our hope, our confidence that the Lord does not abandon us, nor give up on his purposes. But that the Lord will come, just as the Lord has come, relenting from anger and judgement, and crafting us into something new and beautiful.

That is the hope we celebrate in Christ's coming, and the hope we are invited to embody in this time of waiting.

How might you embody hope this season? When a potter holds up a lump of clay, or a woodworker a crooked board, or knitter a ball of yarn, or a seamstress a role of cloth, our imagination of possibility is invoked. We don't give up but begin to take action, bringing about something new. What is possible for this world still, a world God is redeeming? What is possible in your own story, your own spiritual journey, your own little patch of the world?

How might we surrender our cynicism this Advent for some attempt to participate in God's redeeming hope and possibility?

I close with an Advent prayer from the group, "Every Moment Holy." This reading lifts up the celebratory aspects of this season not as the end in itself, as something fully done and in the past, but as memory and foretaste of this larger trajectory of God's work in us, and in the world.

As we decorate and celebrate, we do so to mark the memory of your redemptive movement into our broken world, O God.

Our glittering ornaments and Christmas trees, Our festive carols, our sumptuous feasts—

By these small tokens we affirm
that something amazing has happened

in time and space—

that God, on a particular night,
in a particular place, so many years ago,
was born to us, an infant King, our Prince of Peace.

Our wreaths and ribbons and colored lights, our giving of gifts, our parties with friends— these have never been ends in themselves. They are but small ways in which we repeat that sounding joy first proclaimed by angels in the skies near Bethlehem.

In view of such great tidings of love announced to us, and to all people, how can we not be moved to praise and celebration in this Christmas season? As we decorate our tree, and as we feast and laugh and sing together, we are rehearsing our coming joy!

And all God's people said... Amen.

Isaiah 64 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
2 as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
4 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 him.
5 You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
6 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.
7 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 have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.
10 Your holy cities have become a wilderness,
Zion has become a wilderness,
Jerusalem a desolation.
11 Our holy and beautiful house,
where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned by fire,
and all our pleasant places have become ruins.
12 After all this, will you restrain yourself, O LORD?
Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?