

Our Hearts' Hope

Read: Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians 1:3-9

Today is the first Sunday of the new year in liturgy, the first Sunday in Advent. In the season leading up to the celebration of the first coming of Jesus, our tradition usually fills this month with the task of rekindling our expectation of the final appearing of our Savior, coming to make all things new. For two thousand years Christians have been standing on tip toes, looking for Christ's arrival, similar to the Messianic hopes that filled the hearts of the Jewish people leading up to his first appearing. Sometimes the waiting seems awfully long. It did for those in Israel who awaited the promised Messiah. It does for us as we wait for his final appearing.

That they did not recognize Jesus as the long awaited Messiah is a topic for another day. What I want to say today is that Israel through worship, prayer, and prophecy has given us a rich heritage of liturgical language that gives voice to some of our deepest longings as well. I am not going to go through a long litany of the woes of this world today, as though to bludgeon you into a deep depression and then use the Gospel in an attempt to lift you back up. We all know the world is a broken, battered, and sin besotted world. We also know that even after all the abuse, done at our human hands, it is still a creation full of God's glory and of wondrous beauty. We can only begin to imagine what the renewed creation, free from sin in all its manifestations, will be like.

This year we begin our Advent journey with verses from Isaiah 64. The very first word in verse one is only one letter long: "O!" That one single vowel encircles the plaintive cries of human hearts in distress. The longing of Advent is born in the cradles of human madness and misery. "O that you would tear the heavens and come down."

When madmen take gun in hand and mow down innocent people worshipping God or simply listening to music, come down Lord. When terrorists, with hatred in their hearts and the name of their gods on their tongues strike down your people indiscriminately; come down Lord. When bigotry and injustice

flourish while justice languishes on the vine and people are used and abused routinely, come down Lord. Against all the things that would strangle our hopes and dreams, Lord, tear the heavens and come down.

What Israel knew so well, and what I'm afraid many of us have forgotten, was that the presence of the Lord in our lives makes all the difference. They had a long and cherished history with God and God's ways by the time Isaiah came along. Isaiah said that the mountains quake at the Lord's presence. All those obstacles that present themselves against us as massive and immovable, all those things in life that seem to defy change, the things that taunt us to do all we want, things are never going to get better, those things shake and quiver and shake in the presence of our mighty God. Come down Lord.

Isaiah wrote that the presence of the Lord is like fire that kindles brushwood and like fire that causes water to boil. It is both fast and steady. The presence of God is no flash in the pan. God starts the fire, and then burns hot until the waters boil. God finishes what God begins.

Our God is often the unexpected one. God's appearance comes often a surprise; God comes at an hour we do not expect, doing deeds we did not expect, in ways we never anticipated. That's why Jesus counseled his disciples to watch and be ready. He said he would return like a thief in the night. Keep watch.

Things as they have always been are changed dramatically so that in the light of God's presence things will never be the same. Most of us have spent some time in places where things just seemed like they would never get better. Then, lo and behold, they did. God acted in ways we could not expect, except we know God and what God is capable of doing. We have hope in God. God's adversaries are put to rout. God meets those who gladly do right and who remember God and God's ways. On that day, a good time will be had by all, right? Pause....not so fast.

Isaiah is a prophet. He speaks the unvarnished truth. There is a problem right within the people of God. The relationship has been broken by sin. Notice the order here: the text says, "You were angry and we sinned." Isn't that

backwards? Shouldn't it read, "We sinned and you were angry?" The next verse in parallel reads, "You hid yourself and we transgressed." The point is not an attempt to answer a "which came first the chicken or the egg question," as in which came first the anger or the sin. I think the issue is that sin results in all kinds of hiddenness. The first sinners, Adam and Eve, ran for cover when the presence of God approached. In our sin, we not only hide from God; in sin God becomes hidden from us as well. We look but we cannot find God.

We long for the presence of God, but our hearts are under such a burden of sin that we feel unsuited to be in the presence of the one for whom we long. Isaiah cries, "We have all become unclean. All our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities like wind carry us away. No one calls on your name; no one attempts to take hold of you. You have hidden your face and delivered us into the hand of our iniquities." Here's something we never want to hear God say: "Okay, have it your way," despite the fact that we habitually say to God, "I don't want your way, I want to go my own way." Well, which do you want?

As the passage begins with the one desperate letter "O" so it ends with a hope filled, three letter word: "Yet." In spite of all that has just been acknowledged about ourselves, yet...: "yet" casts the case back upon the Father. You are our potter and we are the clay. We are still your unfinished work of art. We trust in you yet to overcome all of our waywardness and sin and rebellion. We cast ourselves upon your mercy.

As hopeful as this conclusion of the matter is in Isaiah's prophecy, I am so very thankful that our Christian hope far surpasses it in fullness and assurance. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians he used his typical greeting: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

It is significant that grace comes first. Grace is that gift of God that supplies us with everything we need to become all that God has intended for us to be. We might say that grace is God's acknowledgment that God is indeed the potter and we are indeed the clay. Without grace, our lives will never assume the

beautiful shape intended by our creator. Grace is the heart of God at work in people like you and me.

Paul describes the impact of grace upon our lives by saying we have been enriched in every way in him, in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, our hearts' hope is no longer merely something we long for in the future. Our present moments, hours, days, weeks, months, and years have been invaded by a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Jesus is alive and has sent us his Spirit. The Advocate has landed in our hearts. Let God's enemies be scattered.

Paul says we have been enriched in speech and knowledge of every kind, that the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among us, so that we are not lacking in any spiritual gift, and that while we wait for the revealing, the final unveiling of the plan of God to redeem the whole creation, we will be strengthened by God himself as we wait for the Day of the Lord, and when it comes we will stand blameless in God's presence.

I submit to you that what is being described by Paul and offered to us by God is a full-orbed, love saturated hope that will not disappoint us because the love of God has been placed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. In and through Jesus Christ we have everything we need to say; we have everything worth saying. We have the testimony that Jesus Christ is Lord as a living witness in the depth of our being. We know the most important thing you can know, the Christ died to save sinners. We wait for his appearing in the confidence and the strength that is rooted and grounded in the very heart of God.

As Isaiah circled back from "O", through the alienation between people and God caused by sin, to the hope filled "yet," which placed the burden upon the only one who could bear it, namely upon God our potter, so Paul concludes with the one thing of which we all can be certain, "God is faithful."

God is faithful. By this faithful God we have been called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. God is faithful to God's own true nature. God loves because God is love. God forgives because unforgiveness is incompatible with love. Upon love stands the kindness, patience, mercy, and longsuffering

which our sin sick souls require to be healed. God's heart is rich in these traits. God's steadfast love endures forever. Upon God, not upon our merits, rests our Christian hope.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Greek word for peace here is a rendering of the Hebrew word *shalom*. *Shalom* is much more than the absence of noise or strife. *Shalom* is a word brimming over with God's creative purpose. It means that the world has come into its proper order and all the relationships in the world are healed and that God's creatures have become a blessing to God and to each other. *Shalom* is the full manifestation of grace in the world. *Shalom* as a greeting should never be reduced to the trite, "Hi, how'ya doins" so common in the world. It is a prayerful word, a word of blessing. It is a word that should call heaven down upon the head of those who receive it. Grace to you, and peace.

You'll notice I haven't said anything about the end of the world, about the apocalypse, about the Great Tribulation, about the beasts and the plagues and the judgments of God described in Revelation. These things all have their place in our study and devotion, but our hope sees through them all to the very culmination of the creative and redemptive purposes of God. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Grace to you and peace. Amen.