



November 30, 2014

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READ SCRIPTURE – Isaiah 64:1-8 – This is the word of the Lord.

God's word spoken through Isaiah, unheeded by one generation, remains God's word for the next generation that hears it. **HOPE returns to Israel and it is that HOPE that is given to us.**

Today's reading is a prayer to God by people who, being exiled, feel powerless! If you have ever been abandoned or left alone you remember the feeling of powerlessness. There's no one around to turn to, no one to lend you a hand, to give you support, to show you that someone cares. The people of Israel felt abandoned, rejected and in despair.

At first blush these verses don't seem like an Advent reading. HOPE is a foundation of Advent but this passage seems amiss; it comes across to me as paradoxical. On the one hand we get that sense of desperation – whatever is happening to these Israelites – they don't feel connected – they've lost touch with God. They feel powerless.

On the other hand, some verses convey HOPE because Israel has confidence in God. They trust God. This is what they believe. God **can and will** intervene – ‘God, you once came down and made your name known to us. You tore the heavens open; you came down the mountain which trembled. You made the nations quake. You did awesome things – no one has seen any other God besides you – No one has heard any other God – you act on our behalf when we *wait* for you, when we *remember* your ways.’

What gives you hope this Advent season? The love of others – the grace of God – health – freedom – your faith – your community – your church. At this time of year, Thanksgiving, Advent, Christmas, we can find much to be hopeful about.

Yet, Israel struggled with comprehending the awesomeness of God. I believe we struggle too at how BIG God is. It is through our senses; seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling (these we did on Thanksgiving) can we begin to imagine God with us. But, isn't faith believing without seeing? Israel wants that old tangible, sensory experience again. They want it **now, without delay! No more waiting.** They cry out for it. And we too cry out for God's presence. We cry out for our adversaries and nations to quake under God's rule. We cry out in prayer for those who suffer. Even while we wait this is our cry.

How do you wait for God - Prayerfully – Anxiously – Patiently – Resentfully – Gratefully?

The Israelites cry out for God by confessing their sins, in hopes that God will make himself known. They want to be honest before God. I struggle with this wording in the text, “No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you.” This seems to be the general lament for our churches in the twenty-first century. Who is unabashedly calling on God these days? Has God become hidden to us like God once did with Israel? How do we learn about God if God is absent; unseen, unheard, not perceived? Have we lost sight of our Savior?

American culture has over 1 million apps for your cell phone. We are busy people - trying to get every last ounce of life in – you know, complete your bucket list – this is the way we want it. We have many choices of living life to the fullest.

God will come again to be with us and help us. I believe this is the prayer, the yearning for all Christians today – “Lord, come down, break through the barriers we humans have established and BE with us. CARE for us! LOVE us! FORGIVE us!

I believe THAT is our hope - And every Advent Season we keep coming back to this theme – Lord, come down once again and be with us! Bring peace – Give us hope.

We want God to be here, but let's be honest, sometimes we're afraid and we get anxious. We struggle with being patient for God. And if God comes, what

might God do? – We are like biblical characters; fear and anxiety is a part of our faith.

Tony Campolo tells a wonderful story of a friend who had a four-year-old daughter. There was a tremendous thunderstorm happening at his home and he was afraid for his young daughter. The father thought she might be frightened by it, so he rushed upstairs to her bedroom to check on how she was doing. Lightning was flashing and thunder was roaring outside. But when he got to her bedroom and looked in, he saw his daughter standing on the windowsill, leaning spread-eagle against the glass.

“What are you doing? He shouted at her. “Jennifer, what are you doing?”

The little girl responded, “Look Daddy, God is taking my picture!”

Oh, to have the faith of a child and be unafraid!

Our text suggests that God has to break open – rend the heavens – tear it apart like one of those furious southern Arizona thunderstorms. The Israelites are seeking God. They want to be assured that God **IS** in charge, leading them, in control of their lives. I believe we seek the same thing from God.

America is no longer held in high regard by all nations. ISIS has basically declared war on America and our citizens. Other nations stand by and watch. And so, we believers cry out for God to intervene – come down and join us. O Lord preserve the truth of the Christ child. Come down and straighten out the crooked

ways of people who have forgotten you. You were here before – we know – we remember. In our own lives and in the lives of our families and ancestors, Lord, you were there. You broke through our doubt and anxiety and feelings of helplessness to make our lives better. WE have seen your work Lord!

I believe this is what we want at Advent. Like the Israelites we want God to break through and come down and be with us. Touch our lives.

But can you hear the prophet's uncertainty? Can you hear there's a possibility that God may **Not** come – we have turned our backs on God – Christians have fallen away from their faith – for many reasons. I'm just too busy and too tired to get to church these days. I've got a million apps to review. I have 200 channels to surf. I have a dozen restaurants yet to try. We have failed, at times, to be the faithful people God has called us to be – so do we have the right to ask God to come down? PAUSE. We certainly have hope that God will come anyway – but we fear – that God may not show up!

And yet – nevertheless – Isaiah prophesizes this positive word – “You are our Father; we are the clay and you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand.” REPEAT with congregation!

This “our Father” reestablishes the creative act of God that made humanity in the image of the divine. God the potter; we are clay! We are the substance shaped and formed and molded as God would have us. If you have ever worked

with clay and you hold it tightly in your hand and then slowly open your hand, you can see the imprint of the bone structure of your fingers. God holds us and molds us like that! **We bear the imprint of God in our bodies.**

The Creation of Adam is a fresco painting by Michelangelo, forming part of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. If you've been there and looked up you may have wondered how Michelangelo painted upside down. You might wonder where he put the first or the last brushstroke on his masterpiece. Where did God put his first touch on your life? And where is God still shaping you to do his work?

This is Advent – a belief that God is in control – God owns us because God made us – God is responsible for us – We belong to God. We are God's treasure. God is delighted in us, as Diane reminded us in her message last week. And we should be delighted in God's incredible grace and love that is born in us.

God uses The Master's Touch, not only in creating us, but in the invitation for us to keep creating beauty in our world.

So, what happens? I believe that we, created in the image of God by the Master's touch, then claim God as ours. God made us so we claim God as our creator. We claim God to change us and always be with us. When we claim God, then God claims us over and over again, through his unrelenting, creative molding and shaping of our lives. All of our sharp edges are rounded and softened and perfected by God the potter.

A number of years ago one of my wife's best friends from high school lost her parents in a car accident. It was after Christmas and the parents had been visiting their son and daughter-in-law and 8 year old granddaughter. They had exchanged gifts, had dinner together. Before they left for home the grandparents asked if they could take their granddaughter with them for a few days. On the drive home they got tired and fell asleep. The car veered off the road into a ditch, rolled over, caught fire. All three occupants died at the scene.

In the car, the police found a charred camera in the trunk. Phyllis, the grandmother, had become a painter later in life. She would take pictures of scenes which she hoped to paint. My wife's friend took the burned camera to a photo lab hoping that maybe some pictures survived the fire. They processed the film. One picture was salvageable. A copy of it is on my desk. It is an image of clouds in the sky, shaped like the palm of a human hand, open, reaching down, almost as if this is the hand of God, sweeping up the grandparents and their granddaughter into his loving presence.

This picture gave the family and their friends comfort in the midst of tragedy. It reminds me that God is in control.

We are the clay and God is the potter. God puts his divine imprint on us, not only in the very beginning, when we were created in the womb, but throughout our

lives, shaped and molded by the potter. The fingerprint of God is embedded in our soul. "We are all the work of your hand." This is the heart of Christmas. Amen.