

## November 29, 2020 (Focus: Isaiah 64: 1-9; First Advent)

For such a time as this, we need hope. You know the reasons why hope is much needed but also may be elusive for us as we enter this Advent journey this year, I don't need to go through the litany of communal woes we are struggling with, and then there are the private struggles—own health, health of loved ones, income insecurity, etc. This first Sunday of Advent we celebrate with the theme of hope, and I think it quite appropriate that we start with hope.

This early in Advent, we have yet to hear Mary's good news, we have yet to hear the cry of John the Baptist that we need to make a way in the wilderness, for something is coming. There isn't the faintest echo of angel choirs about to sing their glorias. It is just us, God's people, in a sense wondering where God is in the muck we find ourselves living through. Hope is the thing we have even before we know there will be an empty manger to be filled. Just like those people in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine like Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth and Zechariah. Just like those people living in exile that Isaiah prophesied to, or the exiles that first returned to a very different Jerusalem than was before the exile. Like them we wonder, how can we have hope when God seems so far away? How can we have hope when things seem so, well, hopeless? Where does our hope come from?

And the prophet has an answer for us. We can have hope when we remember who God is, and when we remember that we are God's beloved. God is one who is present with us, who has torn open the heavens and has come down. God's creative powers and awesome deeds are such that even mountains quake, that cause inexplicable phenomena like fire and heat. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, you who has invited us to co-create with you.

But from what is happening in the world, all the craziness, all the hate, all the inhumanity wrought against those we would call siblings, fellow human beings, it seems as if you, O God, have abandoned us, as if you are mad at us and have decided to give us all a time out and then have gone away from us. But the prophet was right, instead of turning back to you, we have fled further. We have sought other gods, we have separated ourselves from you. And all that has done for us is to take us further from you, and further from who we were created to be as your beloved. And it has weakened our sense of hope, when we need it most...

Yet now, through the prophet we find ourselves reminded: it is as if you O Creator are like a potter, and we are the clay, and you can remold us to our true image.

You can rework us. Our lives are like natural soil that can be remolded and remade upon activation by the living water, the One whose coming we remember and reclaim now in this season. The coming Christ will renew the promise of restoration and hope. In this season we are reminded what it means to wait with anticipation and expectation rather than dread and fear. We remember the “awesome deeds” your love has manifested in the past and we claim awesome possibilities for our present and future.

Yes, we admit, God should be angry with humanity right now, justifiably so, and we have to reckon with that anger in terms of how we contributed to it and how we might respond to it. Isaiah saw it as a mutual returning: God would turn back from anger as humanity turned back to God. Like a child asking a parent “are you mad at me? Please don’t be mad,” Isaiah has remembered the unequal aspect of the mutual relationship God’s people enjoy with their Creator. The clay pleads with the Potter not to be broken but to be reshaped. In that remembering, there is affirmation and hope for reshaping God’s people through God’s mercy.

The fact that we recognize that things could be better is a sign that the spark of hope that God created within us is still alive, the ember has not gone out, and in this season we recognize that the One who has, as the prophet put it, the power to boil water, well, this One also have the power to relight the flame of hope within us. Or we can think of it as the seed of hope is gestating within us, and we now wait and wonder and what may be born among us, but we also know it doesn’t just happen, there is labor involved with such seeds of hope. But for this moment, we can rejoice that the seed of hope is within us, for such a time as this. Let us nurture it, with God’s help. Amen.

## Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—  
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!  
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.  
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.  
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;  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.  
Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.  
Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.

## Children's Message: meaning of communion

Have you ever felt tired and like you had no energy...then you ate some food, and perked right up, could do 100 jumping jacks, etc., needed food to feed your body, to give you energy

Have you ever felt tired or scared or just didn't feel right, and then someone, a friend or a sibling or a parent, talked with you and reminded you that you had someone you could lean on, someone that would help you, and then you didn't feel so tired or scared or whatever? In a way, the love that that person showed you when you needed it most, well we call it "feeding your soul" or "feeding your spirit." Your body needs to be fed, and so does your spirit or soul. We feed our body with food, and we feed our spirit with love.

Jesus knew he needed a way for his disciples to remember that he and God loved them, even when he wasn't around. And he needed something that would be easy for them to remember, and that would be simple enough that anyone could do it and remember that they were loved. So he took something pretty common, something most people have around every day, but he gave it a special meaning.

When he was having dinner with his disciples, he took some of the food and drink that was right there on the table—bread and wine—and he said, when you share this with one another, remember me. And so now we share bread and juice (which is like wine), and we say prayers so we remember how Jesus made ordinary bread and juice special, because when we say the prayers that remind us to remember Jesus, then they aren't just bread and juice anymore, they now represent Jesus' love for us and God's love for us. And that's what we call communion. The bread and the juice do double duty, they feed our bodies and they feed our spirits, and God's love becomes part of us and can help us whenever we need it.

But one really important part of the story is that Jesus taught his followers about this special meal when they were all together and he encouraged them to share. We can do communion just one person, but it has much more meaning when we share communion together. Jesus didn't just want us to think of communion as a small table, where just a few special people got to eat. Jesus showed us that the table where we have communion together should be a big table, where many many people are welcome and there is enough to share, because what we are sharing isn't really bread and juice anymore, it is God's love, and God has enough love for everyone.

Let us turn our hearts and minds to God in prayer. Creator God, gracious God, we are grateful for your love each day, a love that sparks our own loving to the world. We rely on your gracious mercy in these days; do not forsake us. Remind us again and again that your Spirit is indeed always at work in the world. Help us to see it, to recognize it when it is blessing us and strengthening us and encouraging us.

We have made it through one holiday, and it was not as we would have wanted but we found some blessing in it nonetheless. We now enter this season of Advent and Christmas again knowing that things will be different from what we are used to and what we would want. Traditions and gathering will have to be paused for this year, and we grieve what we will lose because of this. We will miss much. But your Spirit is strong, Lord, and we feel it encouraging us to withstand the loss for the good we are doing, and we feel your Spirit inspiring us to find new ways to connect for such a time as this. We will still wait and prepare a way in the wilderness, and we will still celebrate the coming of Emmanuel anew to us. And we will do so assured that you will be with us in these seasons.

There are so many among us, in our community, and in the world suffering in body, mind, and spirit, in need of your healing compassion and care – grant all in need an experience of your renewing touch, especially...

Bless those for whom the isolation is weighing on their mental and emotional well-being. We hold in our prayers today especially all those working in area health care facilities – hospitals and nursing homes and first responders – for they are feeling the strains of the rising COVID cases. Give them strength, and grant them rest, and keep them well.

Moment of silent meditation...

Gracious God, as we await anew for the coming of Emmanuel, as we wait to feel you with us anew, fill us with hope. We don't need an easy hope that shows up only when things are going well; we need a strong, powerful, robust hope that can withstand the turmoil of the world, and can weather through any storm. We know this hope is here for us, for it comes to us in the form of our teacher, our spiritual guide, the one who embodies your love for us, our Savior Jesus Christ, who showed us that we can live in hope for a better tomorrow, and who taught us to pray to you saying, Our Father...