

Isaiah 64:1-9

"Hope: Pain Seeking Understanding"

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the time in the church when we officially begin the waiting and anticipation of the Messiah being born again into our hearts and into our world. And if the world ever needed a Savior, it is now! But the Messiah was also needed in the days when Isaiah wrote the passage we just heard.

These verses are actually a part of a larger lament that address questions that the Israelites had raised, not only about God but God's actions and God's character. You see, this particular part of Isaiah, often referred to as Third Isaiah, is believed to have been penned to the Exiles who had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the Temple. After 70 years of captivity, this would have been an insurmountable job under normal circumstances, but the children of God were battling opposition from foes on every border. So their basic question was "Where are you Lord?"

As providence would have it, I began preparing for this sermon on my Study Leave in November, the day after the horrific shooting in the church in Texas. And as Isaiah's words of desperation seeped into my heart, I will be honest and tell you that a part of me wanted to say the same thing. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down". We need you God. Come Lord Jesus, quickly, and save us from this pain.

You see, the people of Israel *knew* that God had allowed them to return and even used a pagan King to put God's plan into motion. Yet, after they returned it seemed to them that God was nowhere to be found. He had blessed their journey but had not bothered to make the trip with them. Their frustration expressed their struggle to reconcile the ancient stories of God's

powerful presence with their present experience of God's absence. Why would God be in hiding then? And to take it a step further, why does God often seem to be in hiding now?

Of course, this is the age old question. If God CAN intervene, if God IS in control, if God REALLY does love us then – why the Holocaust? Why the World Trade Center? Why cancer and hurricanes and Alzheimer's and church shootings and children who die? WHY?

And as we wait for the joy that inevitably comes with Christmas, why dwell on these words from Isaiah? Well, as I wrote in the newsletter, we cannot begin the journey to the manger without seeking anew the repentance and forgiveness that are promised to us with the birth of the child that we find there. Because it is only in our personal journeys to wholeness that the need for the Christ child becomes apparent.

Of course, Isaiah is more eloquent than I. The prophet helps us remember that sometimes it is necessary for God to remain in hiding. Because then we are required to seek him. And when we do, we are reminded that God is sovereign. God's people are not in control of when and how God appears. Only God is and God is never late.

And when God is in hiding, humankind is forced – as individuals, as a community, as a nation and as a world, to confront our own sinfulness. As the Israelites in Isaiah's day were. When we are searching for God, we are made to open our eyes and see what part we have played in the chaos of the church, the world, the society, the inability to rebuild. Because God knows that this may cause us to look a little harder for His presence among us.

Of course, that is why God came to us in hidden form in the first place. God did not come as a powerful warrior on a mighty steed who would pierce the hearts of the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Romans, or whatever evil entity exposes our soft underbelly. God did not come as a superhero who would showcase his abilities to see within our souls or make things disappear

before our eyes or tangle us in a web of silk from his magic hands. God did not even come as a King who would overpower us with wisdom or hatred or any other weapon of choice.

No, God came disguised as the most powerless of all creatures. God came as a baby. The omnipotent made himself breakable so that when we reach our breaking point after we have worked too hard or been too abused or had too much grief to deal with, we find God in the manger, vulnerable and weak. And we are given hope.

God became dependent on the hands of a frightened teenager and a backwoods carpenter so that when we think we have to do it all by ourselves, with no help from those who love us, we find a God who would have starved without milk from his mother's breast. Who would have died alone, in the cold, if his father had not found a cattle box full of straw to keep him warm. And we find hope in knowing that God puts people in our lives to help us just when we need them most.

God became defenseless so his earthly father could teach him to stand up to the neighborhood bully and God was so sleepy that he let Mary rock him gently into the night. Indeed as a human we can assume that Jesus' back ached when he fell asleep in a funny position in the boat and was also hungry when the five thousand needed fish and bread and partied with his disciples at the wedding after he changed the water into wine. And we are given hope that God understands all of life.

And of course, God was even in disguise when that same child grew to be a man and was rejected and scorned and hung on a cross and cried, "My God, WHY have you forsaken me?" Because God knew that the cross was the only way to bring power to our suffering. "It was only a divine determination to relate to the world through the vulnerable path of non-coercive love

and suffering rather than through domination and force" that helps us find meaning in the God of the cross. (1)

Which leads to the hope of Advent. Because it is only when we recognize how desperately we NEED to be called anew and receive grace again that we will seek the hope that God offers. It is only when we know that we *need* the baby Jesus that we will go on a journey to Bethlehem. It is only when we realize that even our sophisticated technology and advanced science does not give us all the answers that we will follow the star. It is only when we become quiet and still enough to listen to the Heavenly hosts that we can understand the Good News of the Word made flesh.

And because of this, Isaiah is not a proponent of the sentimental theology of easy grace. He wanted the Exiles who had returned home to realize their part in the mess that the world had become. And God wants us to do the same. Because you and I will not try to find a way out of our spiritual exile if we do not know we are living in it.

And friends, I believe that is why we come to church again and again. It is why we light the candle of hope each year and want to sing the familiar carols. Our souls find comfort in the words of the prophet because we know that we can only create peace when we open ourselves up to hope. Hope is what comes to us when our broken hearts are willing to be mended and when our worst fears help us understand that there is always something new to look forward to.

So after Isaiah lets God's people whine for a sufficient amount of time, he brings them a word of hope. "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." You see just before the Israelites give up on themselves or we do the same, God reminds us all that we are precious in his sight. Works of art – true masterpieces of the greatest artist of all.

When I taught myself how to play the guitar at age eleven, I would take it to my grandparents' house when we visited on Sunday afternoons. They lived on a farm outside of Gaffney and I had started to outgrow football and tree climbing and slingshots with my cousins, all of whom were boys. Instead, I had decided to be cool and hip and play guitar and sing. Now, this was in the early seventies. So I would sit at the feet of my grandfather, a man who hardly ever spoke, and sing "You've Got a Friend" and "Where have all the Flowers Gone" and "Let it Be".

One day, at the end of my concert, Granddaddy offered a rare comment. He said, "Julie, one day you're going to be something. I don't know WHAT, but it will be something!" As an eleven year old, I took it as high praise and a sure sign that I was the favorite - the only girl, after all. But as I got older and went through times of spiritual exile, I would remember that day and wonder exactly what my grandfather meant? Was it really a compliment or more a question of what in the world would become of me with my long straight hair, bell bottom jeans and flower child singing.

That is what the world does to us. It makes us think that we are not worthy. That we can never really be special. That there is no hope for a better tomorrow, for growth, for doing what is right. But that is not what God does for us. God molds us into works of art. God tell us not only that we are going to BE something but that we already ARE something! Children created in God's image. God gives us hope that it will all be okay in the end.

Because friends, the truth is that God would not lower himself to become just like us if he did not love us enough to make us just like him. And God did that through the birth of the Messiah. So each year we light the candle of hope because we know that God will break into our ordinary lives and bring peace and restoration that is extraordinary.

One of my favorite Christmas songs is "Welcome to Our World" sung by Amy Grant.

The song paraphrases the search for God's presence that Isaiah cried for and the hope that we all receive when the Messiah comes into our world again and again. Listen to some of the verses.

"Tears are falling, hearts are breaking
How we need to hear from God.
You've been promised, we've been waiting
Welcome Holy Child. Welcome Holy Child.

Bring Your peace into our violence
Bid our hungry souls be filled
Word now breaking Heaven's silence
Welcome to our world. Welcome to our world.

So wrap our injured flesh around You
Breathe our air and walk our sod
Rob our sins and make us holy
Perfect Son of God.
Welcome to our world."

Advent is the time to open up to the need for God to break into our lives. It is a reminder of our history with God and the intimacy that we can share with our Heavenly Father. It is a season of attentiveness to the presence of God who is always among us and to the hope that the sovereign God is working in our lives, even today, sculpting the pain and doubts and questions of our lives into a masterpiece of grace. Amen.