

## Sermon for November 27, 2011

**Readings: Isaiah 64:1-12; Mark 13:24-37**

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The Prophet lives in exile in Babylon, a stranger in a strange land. But he still has visions – or nightmares – from when he was younger, of the Babylonian army decimating the land, destroying his beloved Jerusalem, demolishing the Holy Temple.

As he was being taken out of the city into exile, the desolation passed before his eyes. He saw the bodies of the dead & dying lying in the streets. He saw others sitting, in tears, amid the rubble.

He is an old man now, many years in exile; but still those visions haunt him. So as he has many times before, he cries out to God in pain:

*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 causes water to boil.*

He has lived his life in the midst of violence and estrangement – war between Babylon and Israel, and then a forced relocation to a land in which he does not want to live – unable to return to his homeland. His plea to God partakes of that estrangement and violence:

*Make your name known ... so the nations might tremble ... as when the mountains quaked at your presence.*

The Prophet confesses, on behalf of the people, their sins: *All our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We fade like a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name.*

On one hand, it is hard to imagine the devastation the Prophet is describing. Perhaps southern U.S. cities at the end of the Civil War. Or Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II.

But maybe I'm wrong about the difficulty.

Maybe if you were in Port Au Prince, Haiti, after the earthquake almost two years ago.

If you lived or traveled in Bagdad, Iran, or in one of the small villages of Afghanistan, you might be reminded of these lines from Wilfred Owen's poem:

*If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood come gargling from froth-corrupted lungs ... bitter as the cud of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues ...*

Or if you were a civil rights worker in Zimbabwe, or simply a Gay or Lesbian person in Uganda.

**Or**, if you have spent any time in the oncology unit of a large hospital – if you have looked into the pained eyes, or heard the gasping intakes of breath; and later, after the prognosis has been given and the Doctor is gone, seen the vacant, staring eyes, bereft of hope.

So perhaps it is **not** so hard to imagine what The Prophet is describing.

Even with our recent economic troubles, we live in one(1) of the most wide-spread times and places of prosperity and health in human history.

But it takes only modest attention to news from the media, or from friends or family ... and only a modicum of empathy to **feel** the pain that surrounds us in this world – and that sometimes invades our own lives.

It is **that** to which The Prophet gives voice – the suffering, the pain that is the inevitable attendant to human life. But Biblically, that pain is never simply described & then dropped, as if there were nothing else to say about it.

In fact, one way to talk about the Season of Advent in the church is to say that in Advent, we look toward those times – both close at hand and further distant – when God acts and will act: to

ameliorate, comfort, or end suffering, and to bring humankind closer to the full realization of God's Realm.

This statement from the book of Isaiah contains one(1) such example.

The statement would be one of unrelieved suffering, accusation, and anger, were it not for these words, part-way through this cry of pain:

*Yet, O Lord, you are our God; we are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember our iniquity forever.*

There it is. It is small and brief in this otherwise depressingly negative text; but it really didn't have to be any larger. It is a theme that runs through the people's relationship with God from the very beginning:

*So God created humankind in the divine image; male and female God created them.*

*God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.*

*Now the Lord said to Abraham: "In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

And for us next week, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent: *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, and that her iniquity is pardoned.*

Jewish people – the people of the Jewish religion – know with a deep certainty that God is with them and for them.

And that knowledge has allowed them to endure suffering and stand for justice as long as there has been a religion learned from the writings we call the Old – or the **Original** – Testament.

Our **Christian extension** of the Jewish tradition makes those same affirmations in the following ways: *Where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, there I am with them.* **And:**

*Neither death, nor life, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

**And this:**

*This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood of the New Covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

**And finally:** *I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God....*

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: "See, the home of God is among mortals.... God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; and mourning and crying and pain will be no more; for these things have passed away."*

Isaiah's words are part of this belief in God's formative love and continual presence:

*O Lord, you are our God; we are the clay, and you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand.*

There is no stronger affirmation made throughout the Bible than this: God's formative, challenging, judging and forgiving, empowering love is with us always. **Always.** Even in the midst of the pain and suffering of life, God's love is always with us.

It can be experienced in so many ways. Here is what some of the inmates at the Redgranite Prison, who participated in our PMP Restorative Justice series, are going to say at their graduation ceremony tomorrow

(Sue Heneman got a sneak peek at some of their words):

*In the Restorative Justice program, I have learned that the community still cares about us.*

*In the Restorative Justice program, I have learned that the community and the inmates can work together to heal the harm we have caused.*

*In the Restorative Justice program, I have learned the true meaning of empathy.*

From the presence of our Prison Ministry volunteers, those men have learned of the judging, forgiving, empowering love of God.

A few weeks ago, there was a media story on The River Food Pantry, one of the newest food distribution and meal programs in the Madison area. The reporter interviewed a person who was eating a meal there, and this woman said:

*I thought for the longest time that nobody cared about me. But these people not only give me something to eat, they actually talk to me and care about what happens to me.*

Another person has learned of the formative and nurturing love of God.

At the end of her talk last week about lay visitation, Mari McCarty said that the lay visitation ministry in our church was, at its foundation, a ministry of presence.

I believe she was saying that lay visitors bring the nurturing and empowering love of God to members who are unable to attend worship with the rest of us – and in so doing, the **visitors** are nurtured and empowered themselves in God's love.

Their presence with each other is affirmed and upheld in the love of God.

In Advent, we proclaim – in Jesus Christ, God's love is always present. So we hope in Christ, and we share the good news of God's love.

The world is filled with bad news today; and when that surrounding bad news is combined with whatever pain and anguish there is in our own lives, **and** combined with old lessons we learned about caution, hoarding, putting ourselves first – the result of all that can be a **denial** of God's all-encompassing presence, and God's compelling, empowering love.

In times like the Prophet describes in this text from Isaiah, there is nothing more important than the powerful presence of God's love.

Hope in God's love is the message of Advent.

Even when it is invisible to us, Christ still reigns as the Lord of love. In Jesus Christ, it is a love known from birth and infancy, through Resurrection and to eternity.

Because that is true – and because we can know with assurance that it is true – we can hear Christ clearly at the beginning of this Advent Season:

*Keep awake. Keep alert. My love will not pass away. Live in my love forever. Follow me each day.*

For the love of God, at times frustratingly hidden and yet revealed so fully in Jesus Christ, we give God thanks and praise. Amen.