

### The World As It Is And As It Should Be

Today is the commencement of a new church year, the first Sunday of Advent. And we begin, not really on a note of hope as your bulletin indicates; but rather on a note of longing, even despair, as demonstrated in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” Remarkably it begins, not with the reassurance of God’s presence, but the noting of God’s absence: “You have hidden your face from us, and delivered us into the hands of our iniquity.” Did you pick up on Isaiah’s almost comical blaming of God for human offenses? “You were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed.” In other words, it is your fault, God, come and fix this mess that we have made. Bail us out here.

I say almost comical, because it would be funny if it were not so true. Oftentimes when things fall apart as severely as they apparently did during Isaiah’s time, it is hard to see how we could possibly be to blame. We think to ourselves, “I am only one person and this is such a big problem. I could not possibly have caused it. Someone else, someone with more power must be at fault.” We hear it now with our economic crisis, don’t we? “The government should have kept a better eye on things, all those CEOs and CFOs and other executives let their greed get the better of them. They made this mess, let them figure out a way to fix it.” After all, it’s much easier to spot someone else’s fault than to name our own. The truth is when you are talking about a crisis large enough to affect all there is usually enough blame for all. Each of us plays a part; some are more minor than others, true. But rarely is anyone completely without blame; even if our fault is not doing more to prevent it from happening.

But Isaiah's brand of blaming is truly bold and daring. He essentially says, "God this is your mess. Come down and fix it." I can only imagine that when Isaiah came down off of whatever high horse he happened to be on at the time, he thanked God for not responding in exactly the way he had asked! At the same time, Isaiah really puts into words a longing many of us feel. We want God to come down and make all things right. And so Isaiah's cry of despair, while it may be an off note, really sets the perfect tone for Advent. Ultimately, Advent is about hope, but it is not blind, naïve hope. It is hope born of despair; expectation resulting from endurance. As uncomfortable as it might be, we do well to pause here, on the distressing motifs of Advent before moving to the celebration and release of Christmas. If we simply skip over it or ignore the longing, the fulfillment is meaningless, hollow.

Of course, some could not skip over the longing if they tried. For many, the experience of longing is all too apparent at this time of year. It is what is lacking or what has been lost that defines this season. And even though we like to think of this time of year as one of joy and celebration, for far too many of us it is sadness and, yes, even despair that is experienced. Even Christmas, with its wonder, only brings more longing. For some of us, maybe even to some degree all of us, there is a hole that nothing can fill, nothing we have tried or know anyway. We can only hope and pray that God knows what is missing and will one day reveal it to us.

In this sense, Advent is not merely a season on our church calendar. Our whole lives, even our world is in a seemingly in a permanent state of Advent, of despair and longing. Like Isaiah we can look around and see that the world as it is, is not the world as it should be.

Recognizing this dissonance, this disconnect is what gives shape to this longing. Isaiah gets that part right, but the part he does not get right, at least in this small section of his writing, is that God is the one who needs to be reminded of what has been promised. As if to call God to faithfulness, he writes, “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.” Like God needs a lecture from Isaiah!

God must be exceedingly patient beyond all we can imagine. God puts up with our blaming, our shifting, our ignorance and all the ways we try to convince ourselves that we don't need God, that we are better off without God's help; that is until we get really desperate and call out for help, only to find the answer that has been there all along. “I am with you. No matter what happens, I will never leave you. I love you. You are mine.” But God's faithfulness to God's promises does not release us from ours. As one pastor so beautifully puts it, “We are responsible. We are response-able, able to respond to God's love.”

This call to faithfulness is apparent in our Gospel passage from Mark. It is part of what is referred to as the little apocalypse of Mark, parables of the return in Christ in glory, when finally and fully God will tear open the heavens and come down. In this parable, Jesus' message to his disciples, via Mark, is to keep alert, to remain diligent in their discipleship. They must keep working at fulfilling what they have promised. They must strive to create a better world through their own efforts, trusting that even now God is at work in them and in the world, until Christ comes again.

But I have to be completely honest with you, this whole coming again thing, this idea that Jesus will literally return in glory seems a bit much to me—Maybe that is a little too honest for some—All I mean is that I have trouble thinking about it in any real sense. I get caught up in details, how it will happen and when? I also wonder what he will look like. You know, will he be wearing sandals, have long hair and a beard? Silly stuff really.

I have to remind myself that that is not the point at all, and Mark tells us as much. The point isn't who, how, or when. The point is that somehow, someday, the fullness of God's intention for creation will be completed, and if we want to know what that fullness will look like, we need look no further than Jesus. For "In Jesus, what will finally be true in the future for the whole creation is a present reality. Jesus embodied and expressed the peace, love, and mercy of what God wills for all people...Christian faith is the confident trust that what we have seen and heard and experienced in Jesus Christ is to be relied upon more than all else we see and hear and experience."

To nourish our confident trust and reliance, we get to taste and experience something of the fullness God intends for us here, at this table. There's something here we are told that does it; whether it's in the fellowship, or the elements, or what they represent, or in the prayers, or whether it is something more intangible than those; or perhaps it is all of these together and more that points us to Jesus who in turn points us to the kingdom of God, whatever is meant by that. But whatever we mean or don't mean by it, it seems to be what we are all longing for, even if we don't know it yet. Perhaps it's best thought of as the world as it should be; the world, we hope and pray, as it one day will be, with our best efforts to live as Jesus taught us and, of course, with God's help and a whole lot of patience and forgiveness! Amen.