

## **November 29, 2020 - 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent**

**Hope preached by Rev. Brent Damrow**

**Text: 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 for ever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.**

**Sermon:**

Friends, if you have cried out to God to do something, you are not alone. If in the midst of your despair or in the midst of your brokenness, your grief or your loneliness—in the midst of everything this world throws at you—if you have wanted to scream to the heavens, “God do something,” you are not alone. If you have wished in the silence of your heart that God would give the whole world a sign that could not be ignored—a sign of power and strength to shake up the powerful, or a sign to know who’s in charge—to strengthen the weary or the faithful, you are not alone. If you have dared to whisper in the quiet of your mind or shouted to the heavens that this whole mess is God’s fault or at least could have been avoided if God

just refused to dwell on those seeming invisible places but instead came out for everyone to see in all of her glory—you are not alone.

You are not alone in this breath or in these days; you are not alone in the breath of the great prophet Isaiah in his days either; you would not be alone in these particular days of turmoil or throughout the history of creation since turmoil has begun—you would be in great company. On this first Sunday of Advent, this out-breaking of hope in this amazing reading from Isaiah makes clear that such utterances are indeed a fact of holding on to deep and abiding faith, for they recognize at their core that we expect God to do something. We find ourselves in this love affair with a God who is still speaking, still doing, still loving, changing, and creating. Whether you know such utterances or not—and whether they would fit any orthodox definition or not, they are in fact prayers. And whenever we turn to God in the honesty of our grief or our need, they are faithful, especially when they are linked to that truth that humanity, that people of faith—that even this body of Christ in Stockbridge has not always gotten it right. In fact, right after Isaiah gets done thundering at God, “Do something, God!” Isaiah is quick to remember that maybe it’s not so much that God has hidden from us but that we have hidden ourselves from God and our world. Maybe like our forbears Eve and Adam, we find ourselves hiding in the bushes, either afraid of what we have already done or afraid of what the calling of God on our lives would be. Isaiah would then say that it’s not God who is hiding; maybe it’s us. Maybe we are fully afraid to come forward with the fullness of who we are. Maybe we are afraid to be fully known by God or maybe we’re just afraid that if we really open ourselves to what God is doing, we might find a path open for us, but we’re not sure we’re up to taking it.

So on this first Sunday of Advent, are you hiding? Are you hovering; are you hunkering down? Are you avoiding? Maybe. But there’s one word in verse eight of this passage that changes everything. Everything in the history of the world and in what we’re about to do changes with a three-letter word. It is that word *yet*. It is a fulcrum; it is a turning point—a pivot on which this whole prayer of frustration and angst, of anxiety and grief—of frustration with the world and ourselves and the way that God works turns instead into an approach deeply embedded in hope. Not so much demanding that God tear open the heavens, but maybe pointing to the truth that we need to tear ourselves open to welcome in God’s redeeming, enlivening grace, and how might we be so bold to do that this Advent? I think there are two beautiful truths in this passage that relate deeply to this notion of what hope really means.

This weekend I listened to a podcast by an amazing biologist who studies the human condition and watches how the human condition unfolds from a biomechanical and chemistry perspective. He concluded his talk by saying that the thing he was amazed by was the fact that we human beings seem to have hope wired into us—that no matter how bad things get, we still imagine and dream of a better future, and to that biologist I say ‘Amen.’

Hope comes out of two things that we find here in Isaiah’s passage: the first is that Isaiah calls God “Father.” Or parent, mother—whatever word you want to use. I sometimes lament that in our tradition and in this church we open the Lord’s Prayer with “Our God,” which is true, and yet Isaiah also reminds us that it’s a beautiful endearing God—a relationship of

parent to child—a perfect relationship—you know the kind—where the parent keeps on loving and loving and loving, not because we have earned anything, and not because of any reciprocal behavior on our part; in fact even when we are at our nastiest, most difficult—even when we do things to hurt our parents, the beauty of parenthood is that our parents keep on loving us with a fierceness— isn't that so?

God has claimed this idea of covenant and remembrance—the God who cannot lie in a promise—has claimed this belief and this trust with us that means that to the depth of our being we can be honest—just like Isaiah was and yet hold on to the hope that God is still working, which in fact gets us to the second point, and that is that God here is envisioned as a potter. Isaiah does it some five or six times throughout his book; he references God as the molder of clay. Think of the Creation story—but not limited to any particular act or any medium; instead, God continues molding and shaping us if we but dare let God do so. A loving parent who wants to mold and shape us into betterness—that is the hope of Advent and the reason that we dare open our hearts in these difficult times.

When we cry out this Advent season about the lament of where we are, we have hope—unwavering hope in what God is doing that's strong enough that we can let go of the earthly anchors that we cling to and instead grab hold of the mysterious heavenly ones, even if they are far more ephemeral and far less tangible. A challenge for us in this Advent season—this particular one—is to let go of our strivings for earthly powers and solutions, and instead find our way into the illogical yet completely true and mysterious reality of the Gospel.

In an interview from 2010, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks reminded us of this eternal truth that while we may be seduced by the notion of solving problems through power, our faith in the Christmas story reminds us that in the midst of such deep and human problems—problems of health and relationship, of connection and disparity—power is in fact the worst thing that you can introduce into the mix. It's power not through schemes, but at Christmas time, God sends us power wrapped in mystery. In the very next verses of this passage from Isaiah, God answers, "I am here; I am listening and you are my people, and I will respond." We are now preparing for the remembrance of exactly what that response was. It was not power in the way they expected in that time and I'm sorry to say the way we still don't expect in this time. But it's power that emerges instead only through radical passion.

The power of Christmas that we're preparing for is beautifully echoed in the poetry of William Wordsworth who said, "What we love, others will love, and through our love we will show them how." Friends, I think that the beauty of Advent is that God sent love wrapped in fragile flesh to indeed show us how to solve all the problems of the world, to come out of our hiding and to accept the calling that God has given us—not through schemes or power and not through initiatives or plans, but rather through the same kind of vulnerable fragile love that was born and placed in a manger.

Our task this Advent is nothing short of the miracle that God unleashed through that tiny child in Bethlehem—that tiny child who was born to deliver us—in our hope, in our dreams, and in our possibilities. When Jonathan Sacks closed that 2010 interview, he quoted W.H. Auden, who said this: "We must love one another or die." And he said that's where we are at

this very moment. He said, “Here we are in a great and glorious world where we have mastered all the mysteries—or more than we ever thought we would of nature. But we have not yet conquered the mystery within ourselves.” And that is the challenge that God sends us I believe here in Advent—that chance every year to open ourselves and to find the mystery within ourselves that we may then share it with the whole world.

Friends, who would think that what was needed to transform and save the earth might not be a plan or army, proud in purpose or proved in worth? Who would think despite derision that a child should lead the way? God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas day. May that be the hope of this Advent season.

Amen.