

Isaiah 64:1-9 Potter and Clay

Advent is a time of anticipation of Jesus's birth at Christmas. It is a time of getting ready like Lent, only the focus of Lent is the death of Jesus, and sacrifice, while the focus of Advent is the birth. It means the presence of God with us, there is joy associated with it. Like Lent, part of getting ready is repentance, only this is a repentance because joy is coming.

Our text this morning is from the prophets and it came in a time of sadness, when things were falling apart. Our task is to consider the way in which it helps to prepare for Christ's Advent.

Sometimes when things go badly, especially when things go badly in a way few are able to escape - like when a World War breaks out, or when there is a pandemic like the Spanish Flu that took 50 million lives the world over and crept into every nook and cranny - we are sometimes shaken to the core enough to focus our attention on our own lives and the sin that is there.

As proclaimers of the gospel, we are always calling for self-examination and transformation, but the idea carries a great deal more weight in troubled times when one is threatened by the falling apart of things.

Though we live in troubled times, it is my view that our times are not as troubling as they have been, or as they might be. When the Roman Empire fell, for

instance, it was worse; at least for the people who experienced it.

And it was worse for the people who lived through the decline and fall of Israel, a series of historical events that produced the prophetic movement in general and in particular, the prophet Isaiah, from whose works we have read this morning.

The Mountains

And the prayer of Isaiah is that the Lord would "rend the heavens" and come down; that the mountains would tremble. It is a destructive vision to be sure, but it is not a prayer that anyone would be destroyed, rather that they would be awakened so they would be able to see what they have done, and what God is doing.

The idea is of an earthquake, where the very ground under our feet is shaken. The term, "the shaking of the foundations, refers to the impact of events to something that affects its very essence. The prophet prays for it.

The Nations

At first he prays that it would be God's enemies that would become aware of the name of God and the nations themselves shaken to their core.

When We Sin

The attention of the prophet, however, is only on the enemies of God and nations for a very brief time before he gets to the heart of the matter:

“When *we* (not others) continued to sin . . .
you were angry.
How then can we be saved?

It is common in all spiritual experience that the soul begins with a sense of its own prominence; a kind of pride, a vindication - that gives over to an awareness of its neediness, often accompanied by a terrifying sense of vulnerability, as if abandoned; and also an element of shame.

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.
We all shrivel up like a leaf.
Like the wind, our sins sweep us away.”

Here there is a kind of healthy self-reflection, most self-centeredness is not healthy. Especially for those who have created an understanding of things where they come away looking pretty good, this healthy self-concern can lead to a clearer, more truthful apprehension of the way things are. It is the shaking of our foundations, the mountains trembling.

Causes

It can be caused by something that happens in the world like the fall of a civilization or a war or a famine or a hurricane or a mass casualty event; or it can be caused by something more personal; the death of a loved one, cancer, the loss of a job, a divorce . . . any number of things.

And there are options: one can blame others; one can go into denial, or one can go into a destructive darkness that results in bitterness, cynicism, pessimism, envy, or worse.

But there is another option - and here, the prophet of Israel, at its time of most desperate need, is at his most prophetic because he offers that other option. It comes in the form of a prayer.

The Prayer

“Yet, O Lord, you are our father.
We are the clay, you are the potter
we are all the work of your hand

Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord
do not remember our sins forever.

Oh, look upon us, we pray,
for we are all your people.”

It is a prayer for forgiveness, but more than that it is a prayer that calls for transforming work, not the work we do of trying to change ourselves, but the work God does;

God is envisioned as a potter shaping the clay into something useful and beautiful. Therein is our hope. Other images come to mind:

A painter with a blank canvas

A musician with an instrument

An architect with a set of plans

A teacher with a class or a coach with a team

Come up with your own image

A parent

Always guiding, shaping, helping . . . molding, very often having to have an adversarial relationship with us because we are resisting, contrary, always willing to do what we are told not to do; to refrain from what we have been encouraged to be and to do.

For all of us the time comes, and it comes from time-to-time, when in our failure to be shapable, God has seems to have stopped spinning the wheel until, shaken, we are willing to submit.

It is good, as if in a mirror, to see our own sinfulness, the role we each play, both individually and as a part of a group, in the brokenness things. That is the prayer of

Isaiah for his people, let it be our Advent prayer. Let us be willing to submit. We are, after all, God's people.

So that the trouble is *not* our destruction, but it is transfigured like the cross of Christ into our salvation. We are told in the Gospel of John that Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us. While we are here God works to prepare us also to be in that place. As we joyfully anticipate the coming of Christ at Christmas, may we be like soft clay in the great potter's hands that we might be so prepared.

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