

Expect a Miracle

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 forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

It has been suggested that in the last decades of American culture, we have shifted from being people who want to be good, to people who want to feel good. What's the difference? Well, in order to be good, you have to have some way to judge what is good and what is not. There has to be an objective standard for behavior. And a few decades ago, in America, that was primarily established by Christian values. To be good meant to live a life pleasing to God.

The post-modern era, however, brought with it the idea that there is no such thing as an objective standard. There is no Truth with a capital T, only the truth as I see it and the truth as you see it. If we cannot agree on a standard for behavior, and there is nothing outside of human existence to establish a standard for behavior, then we are each left to figure it out for ourselves. Without anyone or anything external to tell us what is good and what is not, it is not surprising that we turn to the standard of what feels good.

So we have shifted from a country that wants to be good (according to God) to one that wants to feel good (each according to themselves). The problem with being good, with having an external standard for behavior, is that there is a system of judgment. And we may be found lacking. We may not be good, and that doesn't feel good. It requires lament, and confession, and shame... nothing any of us really want to face. But the problem with feeling good is that it is

based almost entirely on meeting my selfish desires. Which often places me at odds with other people. And most of our desires, as opposed to our needs, really are pretty superficial. They don't tend to keep us happy or feeling good for very long. They are based on wanting, getting, and consuming more and more.

But we don't have to look very hard to see that this fits a lot of our culture. We have shifted from a culture of confession to a culture of consumerism. So if we want to fight the consumerism of the Christmas season, one way is to begin by intentionally choosing to make our humble confession. We claim God as our external source, the one who can justly declare what is good and what is not.

Many of us are out of practice. We don't like to admit we're wrong or have done anything wrong, because it makes us feel weak. We feel like it labels us forever. But through the grace of God, confession leads to forgiveness. Humility leads to a restored relationship with God. And although Americans tend to be out of this habit, the Israelites were pretty good at it.

Our Scripture reading this morning may not sound warm, fuzzy, or Christmassy in the traditional sense. But it's a really good lament, and one that we can claim pretty easily for ourselves this morning. This passage was originally written during the Babylonian exile. It's hard to overemphasize just how devastating the destruction of the temple was for the early Hebrews. The temple wasn't just their place of worship – it was God's home on earth. It was how God was present with them. Without the temple, where was God?

Not only was the temple destroyed, but the people were even sent away from its ruins. When the people cried out, "where is God," it wasn't just a question of why would God allow this to happen (although that was certainly part of it). They literally wanted to know where was

God. Just as Adam and Eve walked through the Garden of Eden, ate the forbidden fruit, and then hid themselves from God, the people now believed that God was hidden from them.

Is that possible? Could God choose to hide from us? Isaiah seems to offer two ways to think about God hiding from his people. First, Isaiah says that because God is hidden, no one even attempts to take hold of him. But that's a pretty bold thought, isn't it? That we could take hold of God? Maybe Israel needed that reminder, that God was not theirs to possess. They couldn't simply dictate what God would do. So perhaps God was hiding by standing just out of reach, just enough so the Israelites could remember who was really in control.

On the other hand, if God really is in control and wants to remind us of that, why doesn't he tear open the heavens and come down? Isaiah reminds us that God used to do that. Mountains quaked, fire burned, nations trembled. But where is that God now? God is hiding even his power from the people, perhaps to show them that he is not just going to rescue them out of their distress. He's not going to intervene in every crisis, no matter how deserving it might seem.

And so the Israelites look around and see that for whatever reason God is hidden. But then there is room for hope. Theologian Patricia DeJong says, "Hope is what is left when your worst fears have been realized and you are no longer optimistic about the future. Hope is what comes with a broken heart willing to be mended." The Israelites clearly have a broken heart over their relationship with God. But are they willing to mend that relationship? Through their confession, they indicate that they are. Isaiah declares that they have sinned and transgressed. They are unclean. Their iniquities carry them away from God. Because he has admitted what is broken in the relationship, he and God can now move to repair it.

That's why we read this distinctly un-Christmassy story during the first week of Advent. Because each of us has ways that our relationship with God is broken. We all know what it's like

to suffer in our distress and anxiety and call out to God, “Where are you?” On Christmas Day, we celebrate the answer. Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God-With-Us, is born. Even when it seems as though God is hiding from us, in fact, God is already with us. In Romans, Paul reminds us, “You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.”

And that’s the real miracle this Christmas. Not that Jesus was born, because that already happened. And we can’t pretend we don’t know that story or how it ends. The real miracle for us this Christmas is that God is still Emmanuel. God is still with us. And God bless Isaiah, who even gives us an idea of what that might look like.

Oh sure, Isaiah calls on God to, “tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake,” but that’s not what I’m talking about. At the end of our passage, Isaiah calls God the potter, and says we are the clay and the work of his hands. Have any of you ever worked with clay? There are two basic ingredients you need to be a potter. First, you need clay. Second, you need water to keep the clay moist.

So, what exactly is clay? Sparing you the scientific details, it’s dirt and water. Yes, it’s a special kind of dirt, but let’s not get too technical here. Can anyone think of a literal story in the Bible when God acted as a potter, shaping dirt into something useful? You don’t have to go too far into the Bible. It’s right there in Genesis. God takes dirt – clay – and breathes his spirit into it. Voila – the first human. From the very beginning, God was the potter, and we were his masterpiece.

Now I’ve done just enough art projects in school to know that when you are done with your clay pot, you fire it in the kiln to dry it out. This hardens the clay so it won’t change forms. But you’ll notice in Isaiah’s metaphor, we are not God’s clay pot. We are his clay. God continues to mold us, to form us, to change us. But we have to supply the second ingredient – water.

Even if you don't put clay in the oven, over time, it will slowly dry out. Maybe you've seen that principle as it applies to Playdoh. Same concept. If that happens, however, all is not lost. You can restore Playdoh and clay by rehydrating it. If we want God to be able to shape our lives, we have to keep our souls moist. And we do that in a variety of ways. Think for a moment of all the things that refresh your soul. Maybe it's art or music. Maybe it's coffee and good conversation. Maybe it's a hike in the woods. Each of us has our own ways we refresh our souls.

But there are time-tested soul moisturizers, spiritual practices that have served large groups of people across culture, and geography, and theology, and time. And one of those practices is confession. Perhaps because in order to make our souls moist, we first have to purge our souls of those things that are drying us up. We have to admit those things that are blocking and breaking our relationship with God.

So let us enter this sacred time of Advent with humility, as we join in a prayer of confession: Awesome God, we confess the sin of our separation from you. We have blamed you for hiding from us, rather than admitting we have failed to see you in the thousand of ways you are revealing yourself every day. We have not called on you, and we have not listened for your call to us. Without you, we have become tiny islands of self-concern. Our links with the rest of your children are stretched and broken. O God, we long for that loving community in which your reign is acknowledged and your purposes are served. Move us to that place, we pray. Amen and amen.