

Sermon Draft

Text: Isaiah 64:1–9

Sermon: “We Are the Clay”

It’s easy to pray in the midst of a storm. The weather alert going off on our cell phones. The breaking news coming across our TVs. The tornado sirens go off, and we head to the basement. Even the little children among us will almost instinctively fold their hands, and the words spill out. “Dear God, please save us.” I have lived in Florida since I was 2 years old, so I am well accustomed to weather alerts and preparing for storms, hurricanes. But what if God is the one bringing the storm, tearing open the heavens, making the mountains quake in fear? Or, even worse, what if God is the storm?

On the one hand, we know these kinds of prayers too. We pray them all the time, in not so many words. We pray God to rain down terror upon our enemies. Or even if we are not that blatant about it, we at least take a bit of satisfaction in seeing bad things happen to them.

Realizing how that plays out in our own lives is a guilt trip in and of itself. It never ends well. But that is not the kind of prayer the prophet Isaiah is praying in our text. As a matter of fact, it is much worse. When Isaiah prays, ***“O God, that you would tear open the heavens and come down,”*** he’s praying that the storm of God would come down upon the whole sorry lot of us, enemies and allies alike, the whole scene that pits nation against nation, neighbor against neighbor, family against family. When I was preparing this sermon, I read a comment on our text and it seems to fit today still. “God appears to have withdrawn His presence from the people crushed by adversity. They feel He must come down from heaven to see their plight.” This has been a rough year and not just because to the pandemic and many feel the same way as Isaiah. But God had not and has not withdrawn His presence from us. Yet, we have withdrawn our presence from Him. It is called sin.

The moment God takes himself out of the picture, we all almost literally go to hell in a handbasket. ***“We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away”*** (Isaiah 64:6).

Whether we were aware of it or not, we prayed a prayer almost identical to Isaiah’s prayer just a few moments ago. We were much more polite in our praying of it. But it was just as powerful. We prayed it in that great prayer that we pray every year at the beginning of Advent, the prayer that expresses the need for Advent in a nutshell.

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

And that could just as easily be the end of the story; we pray to God to deliver us and wait for God to deliver. Except that it isn’t.

The Bible gives us a whole host of accounts of God rescuing lives in the midst of the storm (think of Job) and even God rescuing lives through the storm (think of Jonah). But that is never been the end of the story.

Which brings me to something that I've been wondering about. Maybe you have wondered this too. Does anybody else know why, here a few weeks shy of Christmas, we are reading about the grown-up Jesus riding the donkey into Jerusalem, just a week away from his death? I wasn't there when, centuries ago, they drew up the Bible readings for this particular Sunday in the Church Year, but it does seem like we have things a little out of order, doesn't it?

Except for this: The God who is both hidden and revealed in this man named Jesus born in a little town called Bethlehem, raised in an even littler town called Nazareth never comes in the way we expect. Think about it, Christ the King riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Where's the white stallion and ranks of mighty warriors parading into town. But by now in Jesus's life this isn't new. How did Jesus the Savior of the world come in the first place, a babe lying in a manger wrapped in pieces of cloth.

If nothing else, the Gospel of Mark, from which we're going to hear a whole lot over the coming year, is a roller-coaster ride in how this God of Isaiah reverses our expectations of who God is and what God should be doing in this person named Jesus. When we think God is near, Jesus is far away. When we think God is far away, Jesus is as near as a whisper in our ear. When we expect Jesus to arrive with the pomp and circumstance of a king, he comes barefoot and half-naked. When we expect Jesus to be meek and mild, he thunders with the roar of a lion, just like the prophets of old. And vice versa. Jesus comes to overturn all our expectations about who God is and what God will do.

And even then, just when we think we got this whole God thing nailed down, shouting our “Hosannas,” we will find we nailed Jesus to a beam of wood, like a common criminal. Except that he is hanging there for crimes he did not commit.

We can thank God for that, even when we don’t get what we want. Because it means we will not get what we deserve. And when we finally get to the point when we realize that, we can see God as God truly is. And Isaiah’s prayer becomes our prayer.

“But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (v 8). There is such a beautiful simplicity to this image. The very hand of God molding and shaping our lives into a life we could never have on our own. But this image is doubly beautiful. Think of the pitcher your grandmother used to pour lemonade on a hot summer day. Or the clay pots your father used to plant his garden. The clay sculpture is a beautiful thing on its own.

But it then becomes a treasure in how it is used by loving hands to pour out blessings to others. God is not simply molding and shaping us into beautiful lives on their own. God is molding and shaping us into vessels that will pour out his very grace and blessing into the lives of others.

Amen