



“Who is this Messiah: Messenger of Hope”

Isaiah 64:1-9

November 29, 2020

A couple of months ago, when pumpkins, ghosts, and giant spiders began to appear in the yards of neighbors, our son Benjamin was on notice. As we walked or biked together, whenever we passed a decorated home, he would point and yell, “Hey Dad, looks like somebody’s getting ready for Halloween!”

Last week, the ritual began anew, this time with colored lights and snowmen and reindeer stationed in yards. “Looks like somebody’s getting ready for Christmas!” Three is such a fun age! But Ben’s hopeful proclamation also had me thinking this weekend about what it means to get ready for Christmas, especially in this unusual and difficult year. How are you are preparing? What is on your list as we move into December? Most years, I find my preparations heavily weighted toward the practical: presents must be purchased, cards must be sent, trees must be decorated, parties must be attended, travel plans must be made, schedules must be carefully coordinated.

This year, of course, is different. Many of those practical preparations have been discarded or at least curtailed. There is grief in that reality, a real loss that can be hard to absorb. I see it in my children’s eyes and I feel it in my own heart. And yet, I can’t help but wonder whether this might be the year that Advent gets its due; the year when the meaning is in the waiting, the wondering, the doubting, and the hoping.

In the church, our aim each year is to prepare for Christmas in a different way.

This year at Second, those preparations take the shape of a question. *Who is this Messiah?* Our season of preparation will be rooted in the conviction that what we need most is not another gift or a filled-up calendar. What we need is the promise of God. We need to experience the hope and peace and joy and

love that this season can offer.

This is the season of expectant waiting. It is the deep breath before the Hallelujah chorus. Advent is our annual affirmation that, at just the right time, God came into the world. Even the word, *adventus*, means “coming” or “arrival.” Over the next four weeks, we’ll prepare for God’s arrival by focusing on God’s promises of hope, peace, joy, and love. We’ll reflect on how God’s incarnation in Christ reframes those promises even as it fulfills our deepest longings.

This morning, we remember that the waiting for God’s coming began in thick gloom and deep darkness. Centuries before the birth of a baby in a borrowed Bethlehem stable, a prophet gave voice to the distant hope of a people held captive in a foreign land. Isaiah begins our holy season with a plea for rescue: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” There is desperation in the prophet’s voice. He writes from a place of exile; his sacred sites lay in ruins, his people are displaced and dispersed. Into this hopelessness, Isaiah speaks of God’s awesome power to a people who have forgotten to call on God’s name. The amnesia of exile had gotten the best of them. God’s perceived distance produced the expectation of nothing. They had given up. Who could blame them? Who could blame us, this year, for lowering expectations and dimming hopes?

In such a time as this, the prophet begs God to rekindle the relationship, offering powerful reminders of a long-shared history. The chapter begins with a clear depiction of divine power, quaking mountains and heavens torn apart, making certain they remember who is sovereign over heaven and earth. God alone is God, and God’s people will be blessed by remembering this.

But the people have forgotten. The power of God so apparent to the prophet is unknown to most: “We have all become unclean...there is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you.” Isaiah describes a world in which God’s voice is no longer heard as it once was.

As we begin this Advent journey, we might find ourselves in the same place. God’s presence might feel absent, even the memory of it fading. All around us are reasons for hopelessness and surrender. In the world around us there is deep and sustained suffering; a deadly virus that has separated us from one another, deepened the divide between wealthy and poor, and left so many alone and afraid. Months into this struggle tension is high, hope is low, fear is great, faith is fading. The institutions to which we once turned for hope are struggling to function and rampant incivility has accelerated that struggle. We hear the pleading voices. We see the pain. We feel the emptiness.

And then there are the struggles of our own lives—the brokenness and sadness that we all encounter. As a friend of mine says, “Everyone has something.” Some struggle with joblessness, the constant battle to make ends meet. Some struggle with the loss of friendships and relationships and loved ones. Some struggle with stress, some battle the demons of addiction, some wrestle with loneliness, some find it hard to forgive, some can’t move beyond past mistakes. All of us contend with the nagging fear of the unknown. What will the future bring? Will there be enough to get through the year? Will the test results show improvement? Will the fragile balance of life and work hold? Will strained relationships reach the breaking point? Will we discover the meaning and purpose that seem always to be just beyond our grasp? Everyone has something, and we all bring everything to this season, wondering if hope could ever be something more than a distant dream.

My heart is moved each year by a prayer for Advent that begins with these brutally honest words, “*In our secret yearnings, we wait for your coming, and in our grinding despair we doubt that you will.*” Can you

sense that grinding despair in your life, or in the world? So many reasons to give up. Who could blame us?

Isaiah’s people knew what it was to be on the verge of losing hope. And yet the prophet summons the strength to give voice to their deepest yearnings. The hope that God will return in glory, tearing the heavens apart on the way down. Isaiah wants fireworks. He wants an unmistakably divine pyrotechnic display: shaking mountains and booming voices and flashes of lightning. Lord, I can relate. I want God to invade the mess we’ve made, to show up in a big way. I want everything that is broken to be fixed again. I want everyone who is suffering to be made well again. I want every person who goes to bed hungry to be welcomed to the table of abundance. I want the world to shake with God’s power. I want suffering to end and healing to come swiftly. I want that extravagant hope that Isaiah voices.

But, I must tell you, this is not where the prophetic word ends. In verse eight, everything changes. There is a shift from demand for dramatic disruption to a different image, a new hope. It turns on that significant three-letter word: yet.

*Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
We are the clay, and you are our potter.
We are all the work of your hand.*

Suddenly, instead of demanding God’s awesome power, the prophet makes an appeal for intimacy and love. It is not the conqueror but the creator for whom Isaiah yearns. We are all the work of your hand.

We are deliberate creations of a divine artist. This summer, guided by the firm wisdom of my beloved spouse, I took several pottery classes while we were at Montreat in the mountains of North Carolina. It was a wonderful way to spend some time together, but I’ll admit I was ambivalent about the pottery part. For years, I’ve said that I’m not artistic, without really considering what that phrase meant. It was Ann Laird Jones, a master potter and gentle pastor, who convinced me otherwise. She explained, as I struggled with the clay, that to deny our artistic gifts

is to deny God's creative power. In time, I realized that my aim for rigid perfection was misplaced pride. These learnings extend beyond the potter's wheel. Here's what happened. The first bowl I attempted went very, very badly. I pushed the clay too hard and the mud flew. Ann recommended a gentler, lighter touch. I took that first "bowl" and tossed it aside for another one, moving on. It wasn't until Saturday morning, as we prepared to leave, that I learned what had happened next. Unbeknownst to me, Ann had rescued my bowl. She took it, as it was, fired and glazed it, and presented it to me. She even gave it a title—Dancing Bowl. A physical reminder that beauty can come in imperfection, that gentleness is stronger than brute force.

Isaiah speaks of a God who tears open the heavens and comes down not in fear-inducing rage but in tender love. O Lord, you are our Father. God is the one who holds us like a loving parent when we do not know have the slightest idea how to hold ourselves. You are our potter, gently shaping us into people of renewed hope.

The sturdiest truth of Advent is that, in Jesus Christ, God Almighty has chosen the vulnerability of relationship over the brute force of power. The promise of hope we celebrate at Christmas is that God cannot keep distant from God's beloved children, not forever.

This is what I am hoping in this waiting season. I am hoping that God will come again in ways that stir our imaginations and renew our souls. And I am hoping that it is not too late for us to welcome this gift. I'm hoping that our barriers are not too strong, our minds are not too cynical, our hearts are not too jaded to receive the one who forms us from the clay; the one who keeps covenant never to abandon or forsake us, even when all seems lost, when all seems hopeless.

Here is the promise of Advent. God is on the move, closing the gap between earth and heaven, coming close enough to touch, choosing love over power. It may be too much for you to believe this morning, surrounded by soaring stress, deep-seated

skepticism, and profound sadness. But, if you cannot believe it, at least hope for it, at least prepare for it, at least make a little room for it.

Looks like somebody's getting ready for Christmas.

Yes, hope is on the way. Amen.