**November 29, 2020 Isaiah 64:1-9**

**1st Sunday of Advent *Hope***

**Scripture:** Isaiah 64:1-9 NRSV

*(1)O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- (2)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! (3)When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. (4)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. (5)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. (6)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. (7)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. (8)Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. (9)Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.*

**Notes:**

1. In their hopeless situation, the Judeans ***cry*** ***out*** to God.
   1. They recall the ways God ***interceded*** in the past.
   2. The lament leads them to ***confession***.
   3. This is about ***corporate*** sin
2. God is not to ***blame*** for their present circumstances.
   1. In their desperation, they trust that God is ***listening***.
   2. Glimmers of ***hope*** eventually appear.
   3. There is ***hope***, because of who God is.
   4. They ***remain*** the people of God.
3. Many of us walk through seemingly ***hopeless*** situations.
   1. ***Despair*** has a way of robbing us of joy.
   2. ***Confession*** is an important part of Advent.
   3. ***Confession*** leads us to look at things with new eyes.
   4. Remember who God is and who ***we*** are.
4. God is still our ***Father***; God is still the ***Potter***.
   1. God desires a relationship with us, to make us holy.
   2. We are still God’s ***people***.
5. There is ***hope***!
   1. God still ***hears*** us when we cry out.
   2. God is a good, good ***Father*** who loves us.
   3. Cling to ***hope***, we are still the beloved children of God.

**Script:**

It felt like a hopeless situation. I was in a tight spot, and it seemed as if I had no way out. All my dreams seemed as if they were slipping away. All of my hopes were dashed against the rocks of my reality. I did not know what I was going to do, because I didn’t know what I was able to do. I did not see a way to get out of the pit I was in.

When everything is lost when homes and lives are destroyed, by war or natural disaster, by our own selfish acts, when there is seemingly no way out, we call it a hopeless situation. Have you ever been there? Have you ever felt this way?

That is where our text lands us today, right in the middle of a hopeless situation. After decades of exile in Babylon, the Judeans are free to return to their homeland, only to find it destroyed and barren. What they thought would be a joyous homecoming has ended in feelings of despair. They told the stories of this place to their children and their grandchildren, only to return to a place that was unrecognizable.

And in their despair, they feel this incredible distance from God. They question whether God is working on their behalf— if God is listening at all. In the midst of this great sorrow, in the midst of this despair, they raise up a great lament to God, with imagery that gives a great sense of longing for God to be revealed, a longing for The Lord to step into the situation, to shine some light into the midst of this darkness, to bring about some kind of hope into a seemingly hopeless situation. That is where we find ourselves in the passage from Isaiah 64:1-9. Stand with me as we read our sermon passage today, again from Isaiah 64:1-9

*(1)O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- (2)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! (3)When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. (4)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. (5)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. (6)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. (7)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. (8)Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. (9)Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people. Isaiah 64:1-9 NRSV*

Because of their hopeless situation, the Judeans cry out in lament to God. They wonder where God is. They think they’ve been abandoned by God, and they want to know why God would leave them this way. They ask God to draw near. The language “come down” and “make known” point to the reality that they long for a great and visible intercession from God. They recall the ways God has interceded in the past and wonder where God is this time. These people have heard their entire lives the miraculous stories surrounding Abraham and Moses, how God established their nation, freed the people from slavery in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea.

The lament of the Judeans leads them to confession. As they petition God to draw close and reveal God’s power, the lament shifts to confession: Yes they have continued to sin, and no one calls on the Lord’s name anymore. There is some true honesty happening in this lament-turned-confession. They believe their sin has caused God to turn away from them. They view their righteous acts as “filthy rags” in light of their sin. They are unclean and have forsaken God.

This is a communal confession, a confession of the people as a whole. It is not about individual sin. Many of these people weren’t even born when the nation of Israel entered exile, which means this confession is not about individual acts; but about who they are and have historically been as a community of people. This is about corporate sin, the ways that they as a society, as a people, have forsaken God; the ways they have been disobedient to whom God has called them to be.

Who has God called them to be? A hospitable people who love God and love their neighbors. They have repeatedly lived in opposition to the people they were called to be. This is a theme repeated throughout the Old Testament. We can see the idea of collective sin in the language of their confession: in verse 5 the confess “we continued to sin”; in verse 6 it wasn’t just a small group, but “all of us”; and in verse 7 they declare “no one” calls on the name of the Lord. This act of confession shows a shift in their thinking.

God is not to blame for their present circumstances. They have a responsibility to own the choices and actions that have gotten them into their current situation. Even in their desperation, they trust that God is listening to them. Confession and lament often go hand in hand. Lament is the act of crying out about circumstances. Confession is both a plea for forgiveness and for relationship. In both lament and confession, they long for something to be restored and renewed.

They reach a point where there’s nothing left to say. There is a gap in the text between verses 7 and 8. It seems they have expressed so much despair that they have nothing left to say. All that’s left is complete and utter hopelessness. Glimmers of hope eventually appear. After the gap, however, the entire tone of the text changes. It’s like a switch is flipped between verse 7 and verse 8. God is now “Father” and “potter.” The people are now “the clay” and “the work of your hand.”

Their circumstances haven’t changed from verse 7 to verse 8. They are still looking at a desolate place to call home. They still face insurmountable odds. What shifts, is their view of their relationship with God in the midst of this hopeless situation. There is hope; not because of the good the people have done. Their confession shows they have lacked good and right actions. There is hope, not because of their circumstances. Their homeland still lies in ruin. They have had no triumphal homecoming. They still have nowhere to live. Yet there is hope, because of who God is. God is their Father. This is about relationship. They express their confidence in a God who loves them in spite of their failings. God is the Potter. God is at work molding them, actively moving in ways that make God’s people look more like God. They are God’s people. After the lament and the confession, the people remember their identity. Regardless of whether they have a home, they remain the people of God.

There is hope for us too, even in the midst of our hopeless situations. On this first Sunday of Advent, many of us are also walking through or toward seemingly hopeless situations. Maybe we are looking ahead at spending time with family with a deep apprehension, that our longing for a picture-perfect holiday could easily be tattered by addiction, unhealthy relationships, or unspoken pain. Some of us walk toward the holiday season knowing we won’t have a loved one with us. What is supposed to be a joyous occasion has become one of distress and heartache. Others of us were looking forward to a great year, only to be faced with financial hardship or illness, and let us not forget Covid 19 and we wonder how we will make it.

God feels distant in the midst of hopeless situations. Despair has a way of robbing us of joy. We wonder where God is in the midst of this pain. We look longingly at where God has worked in the past and ask whether God is still close to us now. Confession is an important part of Advent. Not all of our hopeless situations are caused by our own choices, our own sins. Sometimes they are caused by the sins and choices of others. Yet we know there are places we need to confess. Sometimes we have participated in collective action that has wronged others. Other times we might need to confess our attitudes or thoughts in response to others. We don’t always think of Advent as a time of confession, but confession often leads us to look at things with new eyes. Through our lament and our confession, in the midst of our desperation, we are led to remember who God is and who we are. Our circumstances this Advent might not change. All of those hopeless situations we are facing might still be facing us, even as Christmas comes and goes.

But, Here is the good news; God is still our Father, God is still the Potter. And God desires relationship with us, in spite of what we’ve done and despite our circumstances. God also desires to make us holy, in spite of what we’ve done and despite our circumstances. We are still God’s people. We are not forsaken by God, and as God’s beloved people, we have hope that God is still doing a new thing in us. The true hope for the world is still a long time coming, especially from the perspective of our text this morning.

You have the honor of seeing more deeply into the story. You know how it will turn out for the Israelites, but that doesn’t mean you won’t face your own hopeless situations today, because you don’t know how your own story is going to go. You may have years left ahead of you, years of questioning the presence of God, years of questioning who you are in the world.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a great Christmas poem, in which he said this, “And in despair I bowed my head; there is no peace on earth, I said. For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, goodwill to men.” We can feel that despair keenly in our text today, but we often feel it so keenly in our lives as well.

And yet. There is hope. There is hope! Not because everything is going to work out the way we think it should. We don’t live in a hallmark movie; you can predict by the first half of this life, how the second half will turn out. There is hope! Not because everything is going to be wrapped up with bows for Christmas. I remember a young lady getting a box filled with deer hooves, instead of the gift she really wanted.

There is hope because God still hears us when we cry out, just like God heard His children cry out hundreds of years ago, thousands of years ago. Like the Lord heard the Israelites in the enslavement in Egypt, like the Lord heard the exiles in Babylon. Today, God still hears the cries of His children; He hears your cries for help today. There is hope because God is a good, good Father who loves us. There is hope because we are still God’s people. So even today—weeks before Christmas, when we celebrate the Light of the world coming, when the earth will rejoice over the birth of Christ in the midst of our despair today, we still cling to hope because we are still the beloved children of God.