

Isaiah 64:1-9 Bill Uetracht 11.29.23 1 Advent

Sometimes I am amazed by how honestly and aptly the Bible describes the struggle of faith. As I have pointed out many times before, portions of modern Christianity overlook the struggle of faith. They are quick to take us to happiness, joy, and smiles, quick to take us to the place where all the contradictions of life are resolved. But this is not what we generally discover in the Bible. The Bible can be raw, very down to earth, very real for those of us who live in the contradictions, who find ourselves in the muck and the mud.

Isaiah 64, our first reading for today, provides a great example. What we have in this reading is a national lament. This lament begins in the previous chapter in which the author demands God to “look down from heaven.” Now the author ups the ante and says with some anger, “Don’t just look down; *come on down!*” “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

We got problems here, God, and we want a response. Be like some military leader and make yourself known in a big way. Make the mountains tremble. They quaked at your presence before. You came to our rescue before. Things aren’t good now. The city that we love is still in rubble. And we are battling, and in this case, perhaps with each other. Some of us exiles have come home, thanks to the Persians, but home isn’t what we thought it would be. Home isn’t the happy place that we counted on it being. Can’t you do something about all of this, God?

I feel this way sometimes. Come on, God, get to work. We have a mess here. We need you to show up in a big way. Do I need to tell you the places: Palestine, Israel, the Ukraine, Washington D.C., our streets that are filled with gun violence? Make yourself known, God. You did it before.

After that ardent plea, Isaiah chooses to compliment God. It's almost like he's trying to butter up God: "From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen *any* God besides you." It's a common theme in Isaiah. "There's no God like our God." It's not a bad move, by the way. When you are dealing with God it's worth your while to have a little humility, worth your while to remember that not all truths are equally good, worth your while to note what happens when *you* become the center of the universe, when there is nothing larger than *you*, your little group, or your little opinion.

Isaiah concludes his compliment of God with the notion that the big, Other God "works for those who *wait* for him." Those who *wait* for him. Hmmm. The task of faith is often about waiting. Advent is all about waiting. Paul today in his introduction to his first letter to the Corinthians, some of whom are convinced that they have already arrived, that they have nothing to wait for that they are "waiting for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ." There's something yet to come. They haven't arrived. Life is about waiting.

I don't like to wait. When I want to buy something, I want to purchase it now. I don't want to have to do all kinds of investigation. I want to get the shopping over. I want the thing in my hands now. I don't like committees to take six months to make a decision. I want the decision to be made now.

My Dad never liked to wait in lines. So he wouldn't. He would be at a church potluck, and instead of getting in the line with everyone else, he would stay in his chair. Then he concluded, he wouldn't have to wait. Wrong Dad! You are just waiting in a different place.

The struggle of faith is a struggle of waiting. "Waiting. Waiting. Waiting on the Lord" (sung). You can't get around it. Oh, I know. In this instant gratification culture, you will be urged not to wait. You will be told that you can have everything that you want now. It's a lie. You can't

always get what you want now. Life will remain a conundrum. You won't be able to figure it all out. Reconciliation won't always occur. Your pain won't go away. You are not always going to be able to discern why what happened happened. You are going to have to wait. "God works for those who wait."

And part of the reason we wait has to do with our messed-upness and our brittle humanness. Listen again to Isaiah:

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.

Oh, I love this struggling prophet. He starts these words by praising those who do right. And then he concludes by saying that there is no one who does right. I'll bet you have never spoken like that. "They are all bad. They're all a bunch of crooks. Everybody in *that* generation doesn't want to work. Everybody in *that* generation isn't willing to change." It's the language of frustration.

And part of the frustration has to do with how we analyze the mess that we are in. Who's to blame after all? And this is where Isaiah is fascinating to me. Yes, *we* are to blame. *We* sinned. *We* transgressed. *We* have become like filthy rags. *We're* the human ones. *We* fade like a leaf. *We* don't last forever.

But Isaiah doesn't stop there. And I suspect that we shouldn't either. Isaiah calls God to task. *You* got angry, and then we sinned. *You* hid yourself. *You* were absent, and then we transgressed. The struggle of faith doesn't let God off the hook. The struggle of faith doesn't resolve all the contradictions, doesn't give us easy answers.

It's worth our while sometimes to admit that we are to blame. Blaming everybody else for our problems isn't helpful. Taking responsibility is a sure sign of maturity. But don't think that for one moment that that solves it all. Sometimes we aren't to blame. Sometimes other people are. Sometimes circumstances are. Sometimes our families are blameworthy. Sometimes our culture should be indicted. Sometimes we even wonder what God's role is in all of this. Where is God, after all?

Now I don't find it helpful to think as Isaiah does that God is angry and that his anger creates our problems. But I am grateful for Isaiah's unwillingness to let God off the hook. As God has expectations of us, we have expectations of God. And sometimes we feel deeply disappointed in God. That is a real part of the struggle of faith.

After his words about who is to blame for this mess that we are in, Isaiah speaks what some people could call gospel, good news. Frankly, these kinds of words show up frequently in both the first and the second testaments. I call these the "big but" words. You speak of humanity's and Israel's brokenness and then you give us a big "but." "But, yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."

The reading from Isaiah starts with a bombastic call for God to do something mighty and powerful about the mess. Rip open the heavens. Come down and deal with our enemies. And then Isaiah ends with a much gentler, much more intimate image. He concludes with the image of a potter and the potter's clay. God and God's hands are shaping us, we are told. God is like an artist, an artisan. And from my experience, most artists lovingly create their art.

Sometimes we want God to fix the mess. And that's understandable and important. So, don't stop praying for the big things. Don't stop working for change, liberation, and freedom. But realize that

sometimes God is like a potter, God is like a quiet artist who creates something remarkable out of a bunch of messy clay. I think we won't be ready for what happens in Jesus if we don't get this.

For us Christians, Jesus is God at work. In the gospel of Mark, when Jesus was baptized the heavens were torn apart. It's as if Mark is saying that in Jesus God is fulfilling Isaiah's desire for a big action on the part of God. But what kind of action do we experience in Jesus? Enemies destroyed and power imposed? No! What we experience in Jesus is servanthood, a turned-upside-down world, the healing of the vulnerable, the inclusion of the left out, the forgiveness of sinners.

Note the story from Luke that tells of Jesus' beginnings, the story that we are waiting for in Advent. In that story Jesus is born in a cattle stall to inconsequential parents in a little town. Also note the words that we sing in "O Little Town of Bethlehem", one of our favorite Christmas carols: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given." In Jesus we experience a God who comes not in might or loudness, but in compassionate, suffering love.

Advent is a matter of waiting for that kind of God, a loving artist who will create beauty out of messiness, who will be deeply present in the struggle of faith.