“People of Hope” | Isaiah 64:1-9 | First Sunday of Advent

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Happy New Year!

As I mentioned at the beginning of the service this morning, today, the first Sunday of Advent, marks a brand-new church year. The church year is something the Christian Church has been following for about 1,500 years so it’s not something that’s mandated in scripture but we use it because it creates for us a rhythm of the Christian life. And it’s a reminder that as followers of Jesus our rhythm is different than the rhythm created by the calendar year. The calendar year dictates pretty much everything…when we work, when we take vacations, when we celebrate made up holidays like Valentine’s Day.

But the Church year has an altogether different rhythm and flow. It’s a flow that simply follows Jesus. So, we begin with Advent, we begin with a time of waiting, watching, and preparing for Christ to come. Not just at Christmas but for Christ to actually come, returning to raise us and all the dead. Then from Advent we move into Christmas, Christmas to Epiphany, Epiphany to Lent, Lent to Holy Week and Easter, then to Pentecost and all the Sunday’s after Pentecost.

So, the first half of that church year, it’s all about following the life of Christ. Birth, life, death, resurrection. The second part of that, all those Sundays after Pentecost, is called the Time of the Church. It’s a time where we sit at the feet of Jesus and learn from Him. That’s why all the paraments are green, to represent life and growth in the Christian life.

This is the rhythm of the church year. And we never tire of celebrating it, do we? Each year we long to hear those favorite Christmas hymns and every Easter we get excited to sing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today!”

So, this year we’re really going to lean heavily on that Church Calendar to help us develop that rhythm and flow of Jesus. We’ll take some time to understand Epiphany, for instance, the most underrated season of the Church Year, in my sister’s opinion. We’ll use those summer months in Pentecost to really focus on what Jesus teaches us, His disciples, and grow in His word.

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But, we of course, begin with Advent.

We are Advent people. We’re Easter people too, but we live in this post-Easter world as people who are waiting. Watching. Longing for Christ to return and to raise the dead and make all things new.

We are Advent People.

So, what does that mean to be Advent People? We’re going to answer that question this morning and next week. This week we’re going to discover that to be an Advent Person means to be People of Hope. Next week we’ll see that to be an Advent Person means to be a Person of Peace. And the week after that, it’s the Children’s Christmas program, but we’ll also see that to be Advent People means to be a Person of Joy.

People of Hope. People of Peace. People of Joy.

This morning, to tease this out a bit, this notion that we’re Advent People of Hope, we’re going to take a closer look at our Old Testament reading from Isaiah. We’ve spent a little bit of time in the OT the past month or so and I hope it’s been fruitful for you. It certainly has for me as I’ve had the opportunity to dig a little bit into the context of the prophets, where they’re writing and to whom.

But it’s been so fun to see all the Gospel that’s in the Old Testament. Too often people want to bifurcate the OT and NT God. One is a God of wrath and the other is a God of grace. But I’ve hope you’ve noticed, like I have, that the God of the OT (which, btw is the same God as the NT God!) is gracious and loving and faithful to His people.

And that’s what we see this morning in Isaiah 64:1-9…

**Scripture**

This text is absolutely beautiful poetry. Reading through it you might even confuse it for a psalm because that’s how it comes off. But it’s actually a poem, a lament really, written by the prophet Isaiah. And as we go through it we’ll see that we can divide it up into three parts indicated by three telling words: Oh! But! & Yet!

**Oh! (v. 1)**

Our text begins with the prophet’s longing for God to come, to tear open the sky and descend from the heavens. For God to come and set things right for the people. The prophet longs for God’s presence. The prophet longs for God to do once more what God has done all throughout Israel’s history. To break in and shake things up, just like God did when He intervened to set his people free in Egypt.

This is the kind of thing that Isaiah is pleading to God for. Because if anyone can do it…it’s YHWH! Israel’s history has shown that God is a God of action. [more examples]

Isn’t this us, too? Isn’t this our Advent longing, too? Don’t we long for God to come and, in no uncertain terms, make his name known among the earth? Don’t we long for God’s presence to be like that of the burning bush on Mt. Sinai or the pillar of fire and cloud that led Israel through the wilderness? Don’t we long for all who don’t know Christ to come to know Him? And sometimes it seems as though they need to be shaken like a mountain in the presence of God, too!

We are deeply connected to this longing of Isaiah. This is our longing as people of Advent. We just want to experience the presence of God! More than that we want God to come and set things right again. To destroy evil, to destroy death once and for all.

As we listen to Isaiah long for God’s presence…we can connect to that, can’t we?

**But! (v. 5b)**

But…there’s a problem, isn’t there? It’s the problem that Israel runs into time and time again! It’s the problem that has plagued them their entire history. Their own sin. Their own brokenness. Their own disobedience. Isaiah is upfront and honest in his confession and there is no arguing. Israel has sinned. Not only have they sinned in thought, word, and deed but they, like us, are so thoroughly broken that even their righteous deeds, the very best works they can muster, are only worthy of the trash can.

This was Luther’s Reformation message…none of our good works can merit any favor before God. Long before Luther, Isaiah knew this simple truth. Before God, we bring nothing. But it’s like they weren’t even trying to impress God with their works anymore. In their sin, because of their unrighteousness, they, Israel, had simply become apathetic towards God. They stopped calling on his name…they stopped seeking after Him.

Isaiah begins our text with a longing for God but the sin of the people has what? Caused God to run and hide! To remove his presence from the people. This is the conflict of the entire biblical narrative. The sin of humanity has caused them to be cast out from the presence of God.

Have you ever felt this way too? You want so badly to be loved by God, to know him and be known by Him. But have you ever felt like your sin is too much? That you’ve hit this impasse with the divine? Have you ever felt like God has hidden himself from you because you just can’t find it in yourself to be good enough? That even your best efforts fall painfully short of God’s holiness and righteousness?

Have you ever felt like a dried-up leaf?

So, despite Isaiah’s longing and plea to God…it seems we’ve hit a dead end, right? Isaiah longs for God’s presence but God demands righteousness from His people, the same people who have been blown away in their sin like a dried-up leaf.

At this point it seems like there’s nothing left to say, is there? Our longing is met with a God who has hidden himself from us and our sin.

**Yet! (v. 8)**

Isaiah doesn’t leave us in their state of despair though! That’s not how our reading ends, is it? We still have one more part, the ‘Yet!’ part! And it’s here, in this final section where we learn how to be Advent People.

“Yet, O Lord” Isaiah can still write, “you are our Father, we are the clay and you are the potter”

Notice here how Isaiah defers to our most fundamental postures before God. Children before their Father. The creatures before the Creator. It’s as if Isaiah is reminding God (as if God needed reminding) that there is still a covenant at play here. There are still promises that God has made to His people.

In the Garden of Eden God made a promise to His creation.

To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob God made a promise to His people.

To David, God made a promise.

God’s people had failed to do what was asked of them, but they were still *God’s People* by virtue of God’s grace and God’s faithfulness. And this is the only place where Isaiah can place his Hope. All he can do is hang his hat on God’s promises not to just overlook the sins of Israel but to actually forget them. To rid them from the face of the earth. Isaiah’s only hope is in the promises of God that we are his people and God will continue to be faithful to that covenant promise, just as God has been faithful to His people throughout the Scriptures.

And indeed, God is faithful to His promises. God *does* rend the heavens and come down, doesn’t He? God does make mountains tremble and His enemy shake. God does act on behalf of His people. God no longer hides from us but He has come to us in the person of Jesus. The hidden God has become the God who reveals himself in the tiny infant Jesus who grows to be the man who is crucified on our behalf so that our sins will not ever be remembered.

We are Advent People.

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So, with Isaiah, we can do nothing but cling ever so tightly to the promises of God. Cling to that promise of Jesus from our Gospel reading that, not only did he die for us, but that He *will* return for us. He *will* return to gather His people. That’s what we’re waiting for…that’s what we’re hoping for; for the *advent of Jesus a second time*.

But in the meantime, do you still long for the presence of God? Well guess what? You have it! Jesus comes to us this morning in His body and blood for what purpose? To “strengthen and preserve” us in faith and hope until He comes back again.

In the meantime, are you burdened by your sin? Our text this morning is an invitation to come and to repent. To confess. And to receive God’s forgiveness. To receive yet again assurance of what we hope for will one day come to fruition.

In the meantime, do you desire to hear God’s Word of promise to you? Well guess what? You have it! We said it this morning after our readings: This *is* the Word of the Lord. I’ll continue to plug my challenge to you. If you don’t have devotional material that you use regularly, take your bulletin home with you and use our weekly readings in worship. Doris has even added them to the weekly calendar in the back of the bulletin! Now you’ll know what’s going on at St. Mark *and* prepare for worship by reading through each text two times.

As we hear from God in his Word, participate in the Sacraments, confess our sins to God, we’re participating in the rhythm of the church. It’s a different kind of rhythm than the world is used to seeing because it’s the rhythm of People of Hope. Hope that what we see here and now is not what we get when Christ comes back. Hope that God will rend the heavens and come down to restore this broken world. Hope that God has not abandoned. But Hope that our Father and Creator is faithful to his promises of redemption and restoration. That he’s faithful to his promises of victory over sin and death.

We are Advent People.

People of Hope.

Amen.