

Using This Advent Season Well 2020
Isaiah 63:19-64:8 1 Corinthians 1:2-9

Isaiah 63:19-64:8 (New Revised Standard Version)

We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name. O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— 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! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 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. 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; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

1 Corinthians 1:2-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Back when I lived and worked in the Washington DC area,
I knew a friend at church who was truly a “Washington Insider”,
always intense, connected & totally committed to politics,
and who went to work for a congressman after law school.

After a few years, he became chief of staff for a powerful Senator,
and always seemed to have an inside track and information
on whatever was happening in government and Washington...
... he lived and breathed the political process.

Then several years later, our paths crossed again unexpectedly,
and amazingly enough, he had left that world of politics behind.
In fact, he didn’t even follow politics at all anymore, no TV news,
no news magazines like Time and Newsweek, or The Washington Post.

He was very intentional about keeping all that out of his life,
and said that somehow the world of politics and government

was managing to get along just fine without his influence.

He went on to describe how much better his life was without the stress of **“chasing the illusion”** that through his efforts and influence politics and government could fix or make anyone’s life better.

After many years on Capitol Hill, my friend became discouraged, horribly disillusioned, disappointed, cynical and he felt bitter that the corrupt win and prosper while good & justice get crushed.
He’s quite certain that our human effort and plans to fix this world are bound to fail miserably.

He explained that **divine intervention is humanity’s only hope, so he’s eagerly and desperately waiting for God to step in and solve what we humans cannot accomplish for ourselves.**

The passage we read from Isaiah expresses similar disenchantment, with an urgent plea **for God to come quickly, resolve and fix what their human efforts could not accomplish on their own.**

This part of the book of Isaiah was written after the Persians had defeated the Babylonians, and the Jewish people were allowed and encouraged to return to Israel and rebuild their homeland.

But the return and rebuilding hadn’t gone very well.

They had returned to a very hostile, barren and devastated land. Jerusalem and the other cities had all been destroyed along with their homes, olive groves and gardens...
... prophets described it, as if locusts had ravaged the nation.

Surrounded by powerful, destructive and hostile enemies, vicious attacks had hampered their attempts to rebuild
and amid such terrible poverty, suffering and struggle the people felt lost, hopeless and abandoned by God...

... and so from their weary frustration the prophet wrote, vs. 1-2

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— ... to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

The genre or form of this Isaiah passage is **a psalm of lament.**

A lament is a poetic prayer, it’s a plea or cry to God coming from a difficult circumstance of discouraged despair out of control, and that complains, **“God, why don’t you do something about this?”**

Could there be a more fitting Bible passage for Advent this year?

After 9 months of adjusting to Covid-danger, isolation & anxiety,
weary frustration and stress of uncertainty, unrest & waiting,
aren't we all ready for hope, relief & restoration,
for our lives and loved ones to get back to normal?

The thing about a lament, is that after the griping and complaining,
it shifts to an ardent and powerful declaration of hope & faith
and absolute confidence in the steadfast faithfulness of God.

The Good News is that God doesn't ever abandon or give up on us,
but as we read in Isaiah, God is always at work in our lives, vs. 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.

**We are clay in the hands of our loving Master potter,
and we need to be willing to let the Master work his will in us,
and to trust that the Lord loves us and intends good for us.**

So, we are called to submit in gratitude, with hope and trust,
even when it's difficult, or we feel uncomfortable,
and we don't understand, or think we know better.

Christian life is about **being malleable clay** in the Lord's hand,
trusting the God's love and grace enough to let God reshape us,
trusting that our Father created us exactly as he intended,
and will use everything about our lives for our benefit.

Advent means being more malleable to God's power, presence & purpose.
So I need to rely less on my own self-determination and strength,
and instead accept God's control to shape and re-shape me-

-trusting that even when it makes little or no sense to me
that somehow God will use it to deepen my faith and character.

That means that instead of fighting the circumstances of my life,
to humbly accept, and listen for whatever God is teaching me,
**and seek to receive in openness, gratitude and trust,
whatever it is that God has for me in any situation.**

I believe that calls us to look for the positive, good and hopeful,
and be driven by hope, peace, joy and love, trust and acceptance,
more than feelings of guilt or harsh demands as if coming from God.

Imagine the parent of a stubborn teenager with a messy room,

who says in frustrated anger, "I'm coming back in a little while,
and there will be dire consequences and punishment
if you haven't cleaned this room before I return."

Sometimes Advent, the coming of Christ gets portrayed like that,
an angry Jesus coming again in fierce and final hard judgement.

But God knows we cannot clean up our room, our lives, by ourselves.
The point of Advent is the wonderful grace and mercy of God,
the healing & hope that brings us home and makes us whole.

So moving into Advent, my formerly-political friend is quite right,
only divine intervention is ever going to fix this broken world,
and the accumulated mistakes & failures, the messes of our lives.

**And Advent reminds us that the process is already well underway,
for Jesus has come, bringing us hope, peace, joy and love,**
guiding and enabling us to serve and shine wherever we are
and to reflect the hope & joy of God 's grace & salvation...

**... so that God's grace overflows – splashing out and over onto others,
so that we become hope and blessings into our world in need.**

That is the word of Advent we most need to hear and trust today---
- a call for Advent hope, not because of anything we might do,
but entirely because of the steadfast faithfulness of God,
and because we know that the grace of God changes everything.

That same grace became the life-focus & mission of the Apostle Paul,
who after he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus,
spent the rest of his life traveling, serving and proclaiming
the Good News about Jesus Christ throughout the Roman empire...

**...as an apostle, a preacher and evangelist to the gentile world,
even when it was difficult, dangerous, uncertain or disappointing.**

In all of his writings, the Apostle's focus is always on God's grace
along with the gifts of God that express that gracious love. vs. 3
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Grace to you" The word grace refers to God's infinite gift of mercy,
which means that we are all loved, chosen, equipped and precious,
because in Christ, we've been forgiven and are being made whole.

"and peace" Peace is much more than the absence of conflict and strife.
The word refers to a condition of human existence and blessing,

of living our life within God's will, intention and purpose.

**It is the condition of being
in a right and whole relationship with both God and neighbor,
by living as God intends, commands and desires for us,
faithful and using our life, our gifts and resources well.**

Paul's whole focus is on the grace of God given through Jesus,
which isn't about self-help, nor a self-improvement program -

- but it's all love and mercy, our God who seeks the lost and broken,
who is with us through all our difficulties & struggles in life,
and who sustains us even when it feels overwhelming & too much...

... as the Apostle Paul wrote, vs. 8-9

He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Typically during Advent sermons warn against commercializing X-mas,
losing ourselves with planning toward a perfect Christmas,
and neglecting quiet reflection on the true meaning of X-mas,
and how the coming of Jesus Christ changes everything.

But Advent this year, with us dealing with the reality of Covid,
our Christmas can't and won't be like any that we're used to.

Since we can't do, plan and make all of our usual arrangements
for our busy calendars of parties, gatherings and crowds in malls,
we could gripe and complain that God hasn't fixed it yet.

On the other hand, maybe we've been given a gift and blessing,
the gift of a smaller, more intentional & meaningful season of hope,
to be more deliberate in our connections & care for other's needs,
and an opportunity to use this season of Advent especially well.

When I start to feel discouraged, stressed and overwhelmed,
I'm reminded of an experience from when I was shorthanded at work,
and a tractor trailer arrived filled with cartons of catalogues.

According the Bill of Lading,
that truck-load of catalogues weighted more than two tons.

Looking at the trailer packed with boxes, I complained to my boss
that I couldn't possibly pick-up & move two tons of catalogues.

Then with a wicked smile he replied, "Then how fortunate you are,

that you only have to unload and stack, just one carton at a time.”

During the season of Advent this year, the coming of the Lord,
we don't have to have every detail all planned and worked out,
or know & have arranged exactly what's going to happen next,
or even try to fulfill anyone's expectations, even our own.

The truth is, we're loved by God who does have it all worked out,
so one day at a time, moment by moment we try to do our best
to wait in hope and strive to be ready and faithful by relying
on the courage & strength, promises & compassion of the Lord...

... as we read in James 5:7-8

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

**And that is message and truth about Advent,
a vision that can help keep our hope alive!**