

As Advent Gradually Unfolds 2023  
Isaiah 64:1-8

Isaiah 64:1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

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.

It was early in December a little over twenty years ago,  
that the President signed the legislation which created  
the Department of Homeland Security in response to 911.

It's very existence highlights the threats & dangers of our world,  
that there are those who would harm us, even here in our own land.

Today our world continues to be a very dangerous and uncertain place,  
and far from Advent hope, "**peace on earth and good will toward men**",  
which is the spirit and proclamation of Advent and Christmas.

I find it ironic that back in 2002, Homeland Security's  
original motto was, "**be alert, be prepared and be ready**",  
which definitely has an Advent ring to it.

But as Christians moving into Advent, be alert for what?

As Christians, be preparing and getting ready, for what?

Advent is most significant, as the season for getting ready,  
but not necessarily the way our world and culture think about it.

For some people, the season is all about preparation & getting ready  
as in planning for huge family gatherings, decorations & parties,  
frantically bringing together a near infinite array of details  
in a desperate attempt to measure up to someone's expectations...  
...or in trying to match idealized memories of Christmases long past.

Although much of the world does focus on preparation & getting ready,  
achieving such a tinselly & sentimental culture-driven Christmas,  
may leave us with a feeling of discouraged and exhaustion,  
and an awareness that something is missing & unfulfilled.

That sense of disappointment & frustration is also what's being  
described and conveyed in the passage from Isaiah we just read.

The people are back in the Promised Land from exile,  
as they had long hoped and dreamed for generations.

But the reality was an awful, frightful and devastating experience.

They expected it to be a wonderful adventure of rebuilding,  
but instead it was a time of disappointment and sadness.

The city and the temple that had been destroyed were still in ruins,  
and their efforts to rebuild had not brought back the former glory.

Those returning to the land found themselves unwelcome, displaced  
and in fierce conflict with those who were already on the land,  
which initiated the long hatred between Jews and Samaritans.

Instead of living up to glorious expectations of being home again  
there was starvation, danger, disappointment and hopelessness.

Isaiah and the people longingly looked back to 'the good old days',  
better times when it seemed that God was more present with Israel.

How they longed for God to come down like Rambo in a bad mood,  
and crush the opposition with a quick and forceful fix, vs. 1-3,

*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 came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.*

Isaiah longs for God to be present like he was back at Mt. Sinai,  
and blessing Israel like during the reign of David or Solomon.

The people are longing for some powerful sign of God's presence.

Yet Isaiah acknowledges that Israel had 1<sup>st</sup> turned aside of the Lord,  
and their troubles & struggles because they'd abandoned God's ways,

and as the prophet describes their problem, vs. 8

*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.*

This passage follows the biblical formula that we call a lament,  
which is an ancient Hebrew poetic style or form of expression,  
that we read in some Psalms and other writings of the prophets.

By literary poetic-formula, a lament begins with a cry of complaint,  
& always ends with a plea for rescue as an expression of faith, 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. O LORD, Now consider, we are all your people.*

**we are all the work of your hand, we are all your people**  
and on that basis Isaiah proclaims their hope,  
**which is also the basis of Advent and our hope.**

Isaiah describes their longing for God to burst into the world,  
for God to break open the heavens, for the mountains to quake,  
as a mighty sign of God coming that reveals his great power,  
but instead God comes to remote and insignificant little Bethlehem,  
a tiny infant arrives, an astonishing sign of God's awesome power.

**That is also our hope today, for which we wait.**

On the Internet, we were discussing Advent in my pastor's group,  
and a young fairly recent seminary graduate commented,  
that he questioned & doubted "this whole Advent waiting thing."

He explained that as so much time has passed since the promise,  
waiting becomes less and less meaningful, more and more doubtful.  
As he put it, "I've been waiting for a very long time.  
I've been waiting my whole life, and ... nothing so far."

At the time, that young pastor was still in his mid-twenties,  
and really hadn't been doing anything **for a very long time yet.**  
Indeed, many of us probably have shoes in our closets,  
with more life experience and hard knocks  
than he has managed to accumulate so far.

He hasn't lived long enough **to have really waited a long time.**  
He hasn't lived enough to decide that God is taking too long,  
and so maybe Jesus isn't really going to fulfill his promises.

**But still hoping, waiting patiently and trusting God's Word  
is a most critical part of our growing faith as Christians.**

e.g. Notice, we only lit one candle on the Advent wreath today.  
We'll have to wait patiently to light the others,  
as week by week our **Advent gradually unfolds... for this**  
**waiting anticipation is the point of Advent.**

**hopeful**

The idea is that by experiencing God over time and over life-events,  
we can grow the courage and strength, faith and hope to endure  
as we have a deepening relationship of coming to know Christ,  
through our experience of building upon experience,  
as the Lord pours grace into our open hearts & lives.

That is the same assurance we read in our meditation, Lam. 3:21-26,  
But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never  
ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ... The  
LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait  
quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

**Because God has always been steadfast and faithful in the past,  
I can be confident in God's steadfast faithfulness now  
and that God will always be steadfast & faithful forever.**

We don't know exactly what God has in mind or wants for us this year,  
so there's no point in our trying to manipulate, arrange or create  
our idea or notion of a perfect & ideal Christmas celebration.

Such efforts to prepare our own way will never work or fully satisfy,  
and may in fact hinder & blind us to God's serendipitous blessings,  
and cause us to miss the mystery and true wonder of Advent.

One aspect of Advent is celebrating the past,  
but it is not about trying to re-live the past,  
nor to recapitulate an event that occurred long ago.

Although Advent does relate to the past, that is not where it ends.  
**The birth of Christ is just one of the many facets of Advent.**

A second perspective or aspect of Advent has to do with the present,  
and how that wonderful historical event that happened so long ago  
can still impact and guide us & our lives each day and every day.

Advent celebrates how God continues to come to us, how God's presence  
is drawing us ever deeper into a relationship of faith, trust & hope,  
and that over time, we become more and more Christ-like,  
if we are willing to listen, obey and follow in trust.

One time, on a visit to Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia,  
I was watching a blacksmith working in his shop for a while,  
as he was hammering on some metal, and gradually  
reshaping it into the item he intended to make.

He described to those of us watching him work with the metal,  
how all the pounding was to make that piece of metal **malleable**,  
to where he could form it into whatever shape he desired.

**This year for Advent, I want to become more malleable to God's will.  
Rather than always pushing my own plans, projects and purpose,  
I needed to stop trying to do it by my own willpower and strength,  
and instead trust God to take control, shape & re-shape me  
into whatever form or shape or situation God wants for me.**

If a person can learn to accept and submit God's gracious love,  
by faith then that person can be truly blessed and transformed,  
as with open hearts & lives God will pour his grace into us.

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 can use every detail of our lives for our benefit, 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.

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,  
and trust as I am waiting, that God isn't done with me yet...

... as it's explained 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.

So this year my preparation for Advent is trying to be more malleable,  
and step back, trust & submit, & let God transform and re-shape me.

Today our Advent journey begins at the Lord's banquet table of grace,  
a sign that declares how very much God loves each one of us,  
and calls us to proclaim his grace & presence to the world.

Because our God is good, gracious and loving, because our God know us,  
let us await with joyful & hopeful expectant open anticipation,  
for surely God has something new & surprising for us this year,  
**so let us prepare our hearts and lives to receive Jesus anew.**