

"Hope in the Potter's Hands"
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent 1 – November 29, 2020

Isaiah 64: 1-9

As we were getting the boxes of Christmas decorations down on Wednesday here at church, I told Linda and Dan Bourne, "I'm not ready for Christmas." Maybe you can relate. It's not a matter of buying presents and making plans for the holiday season. No, instead I just don't feel like it should be Advent and Christmas yet – not with all that we're living through right now. With rising coronavirus cases, increased hospitalizations, and fear and anxiety permeating our world, I just can't get my mind around the fact that today is the First Sunday of Advent, and in three-and-a-half weeks, it will be Christmas Day.

What compounds that feeling for me today is the real hardship so many in our church and our community are living through at this time. A member of our church cannot go see her elderly mother who has dementia at her nursing home, because a staff member who cared for her mother tested positive, and now her mother is in quarantine. A family that wants to be present to help is unable to, and they pray for their mother's well-being.

A member of our church cared for his spouse day and night the last several months, working from home, making sure she was comfortable, and doing everything in his power to honor her wishes to be at home for her final days. With the help of hospice and other support people, he was able to provide this, but when she breathed her last this week, the pain and heartache nevertheless came. Now the planning begins for celebrating her life in the midst of a pandemic.

A member's loved one is diagnosed with metastasized breast cancer, and their family is rocked by the magnitude of what is happening. A member's son is hospitalized while her elderly mother is needing additional care at home, all while no one can visit loved ones in the hospital. A member's family continues to mourn the sudden death of a husband and father, while trying to understand why and how life is supposed to move forward. So many of us were unable to be with our families this past week for Thanksgiving, so that we might hopefully curb the spread of this virus.

And those are just situations in our own church family. The heaviness and challenges for people in our community is even more real. People losing their jobs, unsure as to how they will provide meals for their families, much less presents on Christmas morning. Nurses and doctors who are just about ready to quit because they can't take the stress of an overworked health care system and people refusing to take this virus seriously.

Teachers and students in a constant state of flux, business owners on the verge of shuttering their stores, those who are homeless facing the hard reality of winter arriving in earnest this week – and now we’re supposed to focus on Christmas? Forgive me, but that seems a bit hard to do with everything else we are facing right now.

But the calendar says it is November 29 – the First Sunday of Advent. This is the time when as the church – as children of God – we are called to look, listen, and wait expectantly for what God will do on Christmas morning. That waiting takes place every year, no matter where we are or what we are facing. Whether we are happy and joyful about the preparations that are to be made for Christmas, or whether we cannot begin to wrap our head around such preparations, Advent is here – and God meets us wherever we may be.

That is why this passage from Isaiah is so important to how we begin our season of waiting in Advent. The prophet is speaking at a time when Israel remains in exile, away from its homeland. The exile has been long, it has taken its toll on the people, and they are ready to return. The people know they have transgressed against their Lord, and that is why he allowed the nations to capture them and take them away. Now they wish to return, and the prophet speaks on behalf of the people. Isaiah in essence is offering a prayer to God. It is a prayer which has three sections, each of which speaks to how the people view God and their relationship to him. It is a prayer filled with vivid images, and it comes out of a very real sense of despair, but at the same time a very real sense of hope. This is Israel’s Advent prayer.

To begin, Isaiah calls on God to come once again into their presence as he did in the days when Israel was in Egypt and Sinai. The prophet describes how God’s presence can be made manifest in the creation: the mountains quaking at his presence, fire which burns so hot it boils water, God’s name causing enemies to tremble in their place. The prophet literally wants the Lord to “tear open the heavens and come down” (64:1), for it has seemed in this period of exile that God has been nowhere near, as if a barrier has been placed over the heavens blocking him from coming down. It is as if Isaiah is saying, “Come down here and show these people who you really are, and what you can really do!” For he professes his faith in God by claiming that no one has ever seen or heard a God besides him, “who works for those who wait for him” (64:4). Who works for those who wait for him. The test of faith is to wait for God in the midst of despair. Israel has much despair. Are they willing to wait for the Lord? That is what the prophet must address in the remainder of his prayer.

In the second section, Isaiah offers a confession of sin on behalf of the people. He acknowledges that God was angry, and because of God’s absence “we sinned and transgressed” (64:5). As a people who were

supposed to wait for their Lord, Israel stopped waiting, and assumed God was not returning. And their sinfulness caused their pain and broken relationship with their God. The images which the prophet uses are poignant and revealing. "We have all become like one who is unclean . . . all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth . . . we fade like a leaf . . . our sins take us away like the wind" (64:6). Over the last few weeks, we have had some very windy days – wind that was as strong as a tropical storm. Many of the leaves fell off the trees and blew all over the place. They would blow from one point to another with no control or direction over themselves – only that it was further and further away from their tree. That is what our broken relationship with God in sin is like: we are not in control, but rather are taken away further and further from the source of our life. Israel had stopped waiting for the Lord to return, and they transgressed. How often have we stopped waiting for God to reappear in our lives, causing us to sin and move further away from our Creator?

In the third section, however, the prophet does not remain in the past, but moves forcefully into the present by appealing to God's very nature. Grammatically, this takes place in the Hebrew word which is translated in English as "Yet;" its use in verse 8 intentionally changes the verb tense from past to present. And in three bold affirmations, Isaiah claims God as Israel's Lord: "you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (64:8). You are the one who created us, who called us into being out of nothing, who freely chose to make us a part of your creation. You are the one who molded us, who shaped us, who refined our shape as a potter does with clay. It was by your creative spirit that you made us from your very hands. It is through such creativity and force that the Lord formed us out of nothing.

The prophet's affirmation is one of deep hope and faith in the Lord. Isaiah acknowledges Israel's sinfulness of the past, but he appeals to God's commitment to his people and what the present and future holds. "Do not be angry, do not remember iniquity forever; consider that we are all your people" (64:9). Remember, please, that above all else, we are your very own. Hear us. Speak to us. Save us. Come down and be with us.

Patricia De Jong writes: *Peace, the kind of peace that the world is hungering for, will not come from trying to fill ourselves up with material things. We try to stem our hurt and pride by running away from pain and caring only about what is ours. We cannot create peace through selfishness, but by opening ourselves to hope. Hope is what is left when your worst fears have been realized and you are no longer optimistic about the future. Hope is what comes with a broken heart willing to be mended . .*

As a friend has said, this is not a season for passive waiting and watching. It is a season of wailing and weeping, of opening up our lives and our souls with active anticipation and renewed hope . . . And so we do not

lose heart; rather, we live with our hearts broken open so that compassion, caring, and God's reckless love can find a way into our hearts and the heart of the world. Make straight in our hearts a highway for the possibility of peace (Patricia De Jong, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 6).

In the midst of great despair and depression, the prophet Isaiah speaks of a great sense of hope in the Lord God. And as such, Israel's deep trust of God is equaled by God's deep obligation to Israel as his own people. The people have waited, and now the prophet calls on the Lord to come and save them. In admitting their iniquities, they confess to their mistakes of the past. But their great hope is rooted in the promise that God is the one who formed them out of nothing, and will never forget them since they are his children. Their hope is in the potter's hands.

In the midst of our great despair, the prophet's message of hope speaks to us when we need it the most. With broken hearts that are willing to be mended, God offers us a hope that the world cannot provide. For the grieving heart, God comforts and heals the pain that seems never-ending. For the anxious heart, God calms and reassures the stress that seems all-consuming. For the resentful heart, God restores and mends through forgiveness and grace. We are offered hope in the potter's hands.

This Advent, more than ever, we are offered a hope that is outside anything we can provide ourselves. This Advent, more than ever, may we be open and transparent with the one who has created us, and who is always shaping and molding us into the vessels God yearns for us to be. And in so doing, may we not only receive God's radical hope, but then also share it with a world in such desperate need.

Thanks be to God. Amen.