

“Clay in the Potter’s Hands”
Isaiah 64:1-9
Sunday, November 27, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

One clergy family decided to let their three-year-old son record the message for their home answering machine. The rehearsals went smoothly: “Mommy and Daddy can’t come to the phone right now. If you’ll leave your name, phone number, and a brief message, they’ll get back to you as soon as possible.” Then came the test. The father pressed the record button and their son said sweetly, “Mommy and Daddy can’t come to the phone right now. If you’ll leave your name, phone number, and a brief message, they’ll get back to you as soon as Jesus comes.”

This morning we will be talking about when Jesus comes, with the help of Jesus’ favorite prophet, the prophet Isaiah.

Today’s scripture reading is part of a larger passage, beginning at 63:7 and ending at 64:12. In this passage, Isaiah laments the Babylonian exile of 586 B.C. The temple will not be rebuilt until 515 B.C. It lies in ruins.

We might say that our lives are in ruins until we come to know Jesus. We might say that Christmas is in ruins unless ‘the reason for the season’ is acknowledged. We might say that the world is in ruins until God intervenes, sending His only Son to be born among us as a little baby in a manger.

I. Advent Symbols from Isaiah (vv. 1-3)

If we look at the symbols in the first few verses of today’s reading, we do not see the usual Christmas images lambs and angels and a sweet baby in a manger. The prophet Isaiah

cries out to God to ‘tear open the heavens.’ He describes quaking mountains. He describes how firewood burns and causes water to boil.

Isaiah’s picture of God-with-us is vastly different from our rosy images of Emmanuel, God-with-us. To Isaiah, God’s in-breaking is a frighteningly awesome event that brings the nations to their knees. It causes the mountains to tremble.

The season of Advent, which starts today, is the beginning of the Christian year. The chosen Bible readings for Advent are intended to remind us that God is in charge and that God is to be feared as well as to be loved. God is like a father or a mother to us. He cares for his children. He loves us and shows us kindness and mercy.

But God is also the unknowable, all-powerful Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of the Universe. He is angered by injustice. He is angered by sin. He can make the mountains quake, the forests burn, and the waters boil.

Stunning, isn’t it, that He comes to us as a vulnerable little baby in a manger?

II. God does the work, per Isaiah (vv.4-5)

In verses 4 & 5, we read that God works for us and we wait for Him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Advent is like a prison; it can only be opened from the outside.” God does the work of sending His Son to be born among us at Christmas. The world is imprisoned by sin and injustice; only God’s action can save us.

This does not mean that we wait in an idle, inactive way. God meets us as we do good works and as we remember God’s ways. When we feel that God is angry, according to Isaiah, we sometimes sin. We feel that God has hidden Himself from us, so what does it matter? We are exiled in Babylon. We are alienated from God. The world is lost, Christmas is a meaningless, commercial gorge-fest, so what does it matter?

Shall we be saved?

III. Symbols of Sin from Isaiah (vv. 6-7)

Continuing on in the passage, we see Isaiah leading us through a series of ‘sin similes’ in verse 6. He compares our sinfulness to one who is unclean. Our sinfulness is like a filthy cloth. You may recall that there were many rituals of spiritual and physical cleanliness in Isaiah’s day. A person was not allowed to worship at the Temple if they did not meet all the requirements of the purity laws. So to compare all of Israel to the unclean, to say that all were sinful, was Isaiah’s condemnation of the entire people of Israel. And, by extension, all of humanity, in all times and places.

Because of our sinfulness, says Isaiah, we fade like a leaf; our sinfulness carries us away like the wind. Isaiah says, in verse 7, that sin continues. No one calls on God or takes hold of God, and so God has hidden His face from us. He has delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

Martin Luther writes, “God creates out of nothing; and therefore, until a man is nothing, God can make nothing of him.”

This sounds a bit extreme to our modern ears. Our language of self identity can make it difficult to take in the idea that we become more ourselves as we allow God to mold our lives from the outside in and from the inside out. It is not a negation of our Selves. It is a discovery of our true Selves, after the layers of self-deception have been removed.

IV. The Symbol of the Potter from Isaiah (vv. 8-9)

“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.” This is Isaiah’s plea in verses 8 & 9.

As I share a delightful description of the work of a potter from the book,, Occupations Of The Bible, by Stephen Stewart and Esther Lense, I invite you to picture God as the Potter and you and me as the clay:

“Potter's clay,” write Stewart and Lense, “which contained fine sand, animal and vegetable matter, and gravel, was washed and purified in a series of vats on descending levels. After the lowest vat's contents were strained through cloth, it was spread out on a hill for ‘weathering.’ Next, it was made plastic by treading on it with the feet and mixing it with water. The clay was next tossed up into the air to drive out air bubbles. The potter would then knead the clay for many hours. Finally, the clay was ‘thrown’ onto the potter's wheel to be shaped.

“The potter shaped his clay into its desired form while the wheel revolved counter-clockwise. By jabbing his forearm into the wet clay, the potter could hollow out his object. Upon finishing, the article was then returned to the wheel for removal of excess clay, for smoothing, or for strengthening its bottom so that it would not leak. The piece was then kiln-dried.

“Decorations, including zig-zag patterns, half-moons, keys, scrolls, pictures of men and women, animal scenes, and circles were added to even inexpensive cooking vessels. Unlike the Egyptians, Palestinian potters did not coat their work with liquid glass (glaze). Instead, they burnished the piece with shells, pebbles, or a tool.”

Listen again to what the Potter does to the clay. The clay is ‘washed,’ ‘purified,’ ‘weathered,’ ‘tread on,’ ‘tossed,’ ‘kneaded,’ ‘thrown,’ ‘shaped,’ ‘jabbed,’ ‘hollowed out,’ ‘smoothed,’ ‘strengthened,’ ‘kiln-dried,’ and, finally, ‘decorated.’

I'm not sure I want God to toss me around like that. Although I do like the 'decorated' part. Maybe in order to restore the temple of our souls we need to be ready for God to shake up our lives, like a seismic shift in all that we are and all that we do.

Closing.

In the Advent season we recall our alienation from God due to our sinfulness.

In the Advent season we look to God's intervention from heaven (64:1) in the birth of Jesus as a sign of hope.

In the Advent season we watch and wait for God to transcend the alienation and overcome human sinfulness.

We watch for Jesus. We wait for Jesus. God does the work. We are the clay.

There's a restfulness in that idea. It's the familiar idea that God is in charge, so we can let go of trying to be in control of everything. Easy concept. Difficult to live it out.

It's hard to let go and let God!

If you are an adult -- or if you are trying to approximate the appearance of being an adult -- there is a nagging feeling as the holidays come around again.

I'll never be ready!

Robert Fulghum's quirky take on Christmas is helpful in that regard. Here it is, from his book, Christmas Friarworks:

"I usually draw up a heavy duty Things-To-Do list about this time of year.

"I am black belt at lists. I even have lists of lists.

"Seven pages of expectations that are in themselves enough to permanently
destroy the spirit of Christmas.

"But this year I started from somewhere else in my mind.

“New list.

“One page.

“A Thing-To-Be list.

“Concentrating on the feelings I wanted to have,

“The condition of mind and spirit I yearned for,

“The quality of life I wanted to manifest,

“The vibrations I wanted to give off to other people.

“A Things-To-Be list for Christmas.

“Then I boiled the list down into one line.

“And then I wrote that word on a tiny piece of paper.

“And then I wrapped that tiny piece of paper around a small candy cane.

“And ate it.

“List and all.

“Shazam! Hark the Hearal Angels Sing!”

“Oh sure, it’s a little crazy. But since when is Christmas supposed to make sense?

“Oh sure, it’s a little early – today is December 6 – but since when is

Christmas a matter of time?

“I mean, who makes the rules and regulations about Christmas, anyway?

“Who says it must be an orderly, organized affair?

“Who is in charge of Christmas?

“Me, that’s who.

“The Christmas-list eater.

“I suppose you want to know what the one word was.

“Nope. You got to work it out for yourself.

“Like Christmas.

“Cause if it ain’t inside you somewhere, all the lists in the world won’t make it happen.

“Here, have a candy cane on me.”

May the great Potter, maker of all great works of clay – maker of YOU! – come to you in a new way this Christmas. During this Advent season of preparation, may you become more open to the “one Word” He desires more than anything else to place in your heart.

Amen.