

Isaiah 64:1-3, 6-8

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

² 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!

³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ **Yet, O LORD, you are our God; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.**

Focus statement: We awaken to God's purpose, which begins in darkness—whether seed in the ground, child in the womb, or new self in the soul. We are shaking, fearful, and resistant, yet we call upon God to tear open the heavens and be present with us in our uncertainty.

This past week I had one of those good and tough conversations with my mom – you know, one of those light-hearted holiday conversations where I challenged her view of God. Gently (I hope). I have shared before about some of the various people my mom has welcomed into our family over the years – of the countless people who have lived in our basement for a time; the numerous children who call her ‘Grandma’ no matter their biological connection, and so on. One of the things that often causes my mom pain and anguish is her worry over many of these people’s immortal souls – she is very worried that some of the people who she has loved for so long, that she has developed deep and lasting relationships with – that she will not see them in heaven. She has shared this fear with me many times through teary eyes. And usually I don’t say much about this, I just try to listen and allow her to express her hurt and fear. But last week I wondered, maybe she doesn’t have to carry around this anguish and fear, and so I asked her, “mom, is your view of eternity really consistent with the rest of your view of who God is and how God works?” “Mom, do you think that you love Ian and Jeffery more than God loves them?”

Despite my chosen profession, I usually try not to get someone to question their working worldview – but sometimes we have views of God that cause us unnecessary anguish – sometimes our inherited views of God cause us to miss what God is doing in the world.

Every third year this passage from Isaiah begins our Advent season – the prophet pleading with God, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” The book of Isaiah is generally thought to have been written by three different authors, three different prophets who lived in

three different, yet interconnected eras. There was 1st Isaiah who lived before the Babylonian exile – when the Israelite nation-state was defeated, sacked, and had their best and brightest marched off to Babylon. There was 2nd Isaiah who prophesied during the exile – his words giving memory of home and hope for a new and brighter future. And then there is 3rd Isaiah, who lived after the return from exile, when the great hope and optimism of return to their homeland is met with the difficult realities of lived experience. This is the Isaiah that we get this morning, 3rd Isaiah, the one who is feeling the loss of enthusiasm and hope – the one who is finding this road of forming a renewed nation much more difficult than he had anticipated – a prophet whose once great optimism is being met with the feeling that God is not present – a prophet who feels the noticeable absence of God. His hope of how the people would act upon their return, is falling; his hope for how God would act upon their return, it is floundering.

In his prayer, the prophet reminds God, “remember when you used to tear open the heavens and come down?” Remember when you used to be actively involved in the lives of your people? Remember when you acted for us? Remember “When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.” That was awesome – you should do that again! And so we begin our Advent in 2017 with this 3rd Isaiah who has lost a bit of optimism and certainty; we begin our season of hope, this Sunday when we light the first Advent candle of hope, with a prophet who seems to have a floundering hope – one whose hopes and dreams are being returned empty.

I think many of us can relate to this – times when our great hope and optimism became empty; times when we hoped God would act in a particular way, and God did not. When I read some of

They were being slashed and burned in order to make more grazing land for cattle. I remember that young sense of zeal that we could really do something to save these valuable lands – I remember talking to my parents about what we could and should do, how we could actually buy a part of the rainforest to save it. And today, whenever I read or hear stats like this,



that every minute we lose what amounts to 20 football fields worth of life-giving, beautiful rain forest, I feel a bit like 3rd Isaiah, feeling that noticeable loss of hope – a palpable loss of optimism for our future – a loss of optimism in our human response.

And I can't think of the word 'hope' without thinking of this work of art –



of how many people put their hope for a renewed America in this man's presidency – the hope of a first Black President, that things might really be brighter and more just. And regardless of how we might view Obama's presidency, I think most who believed in the message of this poster, today likely feel a bit like 3rd Isaiah – feeling now an absence of hope after the realities on the ground. It is likely the same feeling that any of us has after putting too much hope in any one political figure or leader.

And so, what was it that caused such a feeling of God's absence for 3rd Isaiah 500 years before the birth of Jesus? Why did this Isaiah experience such a sense of God's absence? The prophet begins his psalm/prayer to God by invoking the ancient image of the Lord as the cosmic, divine warrior who, according to Israel's collective memory (the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible), God has victoriously 'come down' to Israel's aid again and again.¹ With a tone of desperation, the prophet implores the Lord to act in such a way once again, NOW, in his own time, "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down*" (64:1). "Act as you once acted" says 3rd Isaiah, "get down here and save us as you once did – during the good old days of our empire." God is *not* acting how Isaiah believes God should act – Yahweh is not acting how the history of his people have led him believe that God should and will act.

The story they have built their faith in the Lord upon suggests one thing – that God will act decisively for their preservation if they follow God; and now their experience suggests something else.

¹ Some examples would include: 2 Samuel 22, Psalm 18, Micah 1:2-4.

It makes me wonder if the author/prophet 3rd Isaiah has been a bit malformed by the history he has been given – is he missing God because some of what he has been told is not history, but rather an ideology? Have the ways the victors wrote their own history caused him to have false expectations of a God who will rip open the heavens? When Isaiah and the people of his time read their collective history in the books of *Joshua* and *Judges* what they find is a God who is a military interventionist. They find a history that says, as long as we were being faithful, God would let nothing stop us. That version of history leads them to believe that this is how God should and will continue to act. But, perhaps God never was a Divine Warrior; perhaps God never wanted to be called the “Lord of hosts” (which means “the Lord of armies”) – perhaps God never meant to reconcile the whole world by wiping out entire people groups, as part of the Old Testament suggestions. Perhaps what we and 3rd Isaiah find in some of those ancient texts is not a literal history of God and God’s people but something else.

For example, much of the archaeological and historical record does not support a good bit of the Old Testament conquest stories from *Joshua* and *Judges*; the historical record (at this point) might be offering a much more peaceful picture of reality. The Biblical saga of the Israelites entering Canaan is that of a formerly enslaved people who, are led by Joshua from one victory to another in a stunning series of sieges and battles. They laid waste to the Canaanites and took this land for themselves and God. But archaeology has uncovered a dramatic discrepancy between the Bible and the situation within Canaan at this time.²

² This historical and archaeological perspective comes from *The Bible Unearthed* by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman

For example, a recent genetic study has found that Canaanites survived the centuries to have numerous descendants in modern-day Lebanon. Scientists were able to extract enough DNA from the remains of five people found in the former Canaanite city state of Sidon – it was dated to about 3,700 years ago – and they were able to sequence their entire genome. That is amazing. What they found is that this DNA matches that of our present day Lebanese sisters and brothers. So if this Biblical history is literal and a whole people group was whipped out, “the Canaanites” write these researchers, “could not have directly contributed genetically to present-day populations.”³

And archaeological discoveries of the Canaanite region have lead some scholars to theorize that the emergence of the Israelites in the “promised land” was much more peaceful and gradual than told in the Biblical account. From this period of history, they do not find entire cities destroyed in one short period, with a new group rebuilding on top of the old. What they have found seems to suggest more of a slow intermingling. They find the sudden emergence of small communities that sprang up in the central hill country of Canaan around 1200 BCE with *no sign of violent invasion or even the infiltration of a clearly defined ethnic group*. Instead, some scholars say, it seemed to be a revolution in lifestyle. Not fortified cities. No large or grand buildings. And no weapons unearthed.⁴ These were, some scholars believe, the first Israelites of the region.

³ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/bible-canaanites-wiped-out-old-testament-israelites-lebanon-descendants-discovered-science-dna-a7862936.html>

⁴ *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts*. Israel Finkelstein & Neil Asher Silberman.

And so, perhaps because of how their history was written and remembered – in order for them to see the activity of God – 3rd Isaiah and the people of his time had to rework their images of God in a new way. Perhaps God had not vanquished their enemies as they had recorded – perhaps God had worked much differently than was recorded. And so sometimes if we have painted history with a brush that so favors our people, it misshapes our images – not only does it misshape the image of ourselves and our nation-state, but it misshapes our very image of God. It causes us to miss any activity of God short of God tearing open the heavens and coming down.

This version of history perhaps caused 3rd Isaiah to be as the man who drowns in the famous parable: A massive flood has come to his town and the waters are rising, from his second story window he prays to God to save him and is confident in God's salvific activity. Soon after a neighbor comes by in a canoe and says, "get in" to which the man replies, "no, God will save me." And as the waters continue to rise, the man makes his way to his roof – he is spotted by rescue workers in a speed boat who come by, but he refuses to get in, again saying, "God will save me." Finally, with the waters still rising, he is at the peak of his house when a National Guard helicopter lowers a rope ladder for him, which he will not take, yelling to them, "God will save me." And eventually the man drowns. And as the story goes, as he gets to heaven he has a beef with God, "God, why didn't you save me? I trusted in you. I waited on you. You had a chance for so many to see your greatness!"

To which God replied, "I tried to save you three times: I sent you a canoe, a speedboat and a helicopter."

But of course when we only recognize the activity of God as being that of the heavens being torn apart, when we only recognize the activity of God to be when God acts decisively for our side and our people, when we only recognize the activity of God to be when our prayers are answered exactly in the manner which we ask – like 3rd Isaiah, we miss the vast majority of what God is doing in the world. The reconciliation of all things does not happen overnight.

When we are waiting on the God of this history, we forget much, we forget that God did not enter the world as a dictator or military general, but as a peasant child who was hunted by kings. When we are greatly discouraged and feel the palpable absence of God, we must remember that God did NOT reconcile all things through the waving of one finger or the sending of a lightning bolt, but through the birth, life, rejection and suffering of Jesus.

What God are you waiting upon this Advent season? How does our image of God perhaps need to be reworked and reshaped? Just as 3rd Isaiah had to rework his image of a God from a cosmic military-like interventionist, to an artisan – to a new image of a potter slowly and delicately working, molding, and continually fashioning this broken people – we too have images that need to be reshaped by the God of love. Is your God Vengeful; Male; American; White? Is your God a Cosmic problem solver; a Demolition worker? A Magician? Is your God Indifferent? Inactive? A Judge? Perhaps we too need a continual shaping of our view of God and who we are in light of that image.

During Advent, we remember with hope a new story of an unexpected God – we remember that God is the one who works in unexpected ways – so unexpected that most missed it while it was happening; we remember that God works not through kings and governors, but through young peasant girls and hard-worn craftsman; we remember that God works by calling human partners to join with God; we remember the ways of God are exceedingly different from our ways. In the season of Advent we remember that the reconciliation of all things is not a quick and easy process – we remember that God did not tear open the heavens and vanquish our enemies, but... during Advent, we make the claim that God did come down.

In the midst of our fading optimism, in the midst of feeling the absence of God – where might your image of God need to be reworked and reshaped by God the artisan? *Yet, O Lord, you are our God; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.*

Let us continue in hope, to look for the God who has never stopped working for the reconciliation of all things.

Sending Blessing:

And now as you go from this place, may the God of Hope go with you – Showing us where our images of God are limiting and blinding – that we might see anew where God is at work – that we might hear again where God is inviting us in to shape and transform the world – to be shaped by the Great Potter, that healing and hope might flow through us to the world. Go in peace. Amen.

