

“Make Ready a People”

First Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 64: 1 – 9

Luke 1: 5 – 25

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This past week while visiting our neighborhood coffee/sandwich shop, I stood in line behind a young woman who was ordering lunch. When she asked about coffee choices, the cashier began ticking off the holiday specials: “We have eggnog latte, white chocolate latte, regular latte with peppermint whip cream.” The customer threw up her arms in joy and shouted, “Yea, it’s Christmas time – peppermint whip cream!!”

My outward giddy self was right there with her. December is here and so is peppermint whip cream! My inward self was a bit more somber, though. While standing in line, a Bible lay open on my desk back in my office not more than a stone’s throw from the coffee shop. The pages were open to Isaiah. As I stood there celebrating peppermint whip cream, the echoes of the words from the prophet swirled around in my thoughts, “Oh that you would open the heavens and come down, God!”

This season of Advent is a time of expectant waiting, a time of longing and is like a two-sided coin.

For some of us, our steps are quick and excited, giddy with joy, celebrating the holiday now while at the same time marking the days until Christmas – are we there yet?!

For some of us, our steps are more hesitant, maybe even dragging a foot at times, weighed down with memories, melancholy – can’t we just skip over these days?

And probably for most of us, our walk during these days is a combination of both. On the one hand, we think of these days of Advent as a time of patient, hopeful waiting for the joyous event of Christmas. Now we wait. Then God comes. All is right with the world. On the other hand, we see, and we live the brokenness that surrounds us. Spiritual guide Richard Rohr often writes about embracing the both/and in life, not setting ourselves up for either/or situations. Our readings for this beginning of Advent do just that; name both the despair and hope before us, and allows us to see that the naming of both is the response of God’s faithful people throughout the ages.

I wonder if Zechariah and Elizabeth felt despair? I’m not referring to the Zechariah and Elizabeth at the end of their story, when a son was born, and they named him John, and all was right with their world. No, I’m referring to the couple during those years of barrenness, when they had prayed for new life (and you can take this metaphor of new

life where you need to take it in your life, not necessarily a baby, but what you are searching for, longing for), Elizabeth and Zechariah had prayed and prayed, and nothing happened. Our translation from today read, “They were good and just people in God’s sight and, yet they had this sadness.” I can imagine Elizabeth crying out those words of Isaiah in the middle of many sleepless nights, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down, God! Like you did in ages past, like you were present before, why don’t you show yourself and make things right?”

Isaiah, chapter 64, was written after the Babylonian conquest. The people of Israel had returned from exile, but their land lay in ruins. The re-building of the temple, that which was a symbol of their faith, had not begun. Their dreams had been filled with returning, with being a people in exile no more. The reality of a land in ruin had not been a part of their dreaming. They came home to find themselves disoriented, devastated, in despair. The prophet Isaiah’s words name that context, they are words of pain seeking understanding, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” A cry of lament that is from the heart of the returned people, that is on the lips of those like Elizabeth and oh can we pause for just a moment, in the midst of peppermint whip cream celebrations and hear that cry coming from a faithful people today?

Our country that boasts ideals of justice had an angry mob of white men marching in the middle of the streets just a few months ago, carrying torches and chanting anti-Semitic slogans, confederate flags and swastikas blurring together. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

Another mass shooting.

‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!’

A political system that is so broken that dialogue and compromise are unheard of, and each morning we wake up to new tweets and a crazier reality,

Clergy arrested for protesting the possibility of a tax system that seems to rob from the poor and give to the rich,

Health insurance costs rising and making what should be a human right for all unobtainable for the poor once again,

Daily, sometimes hourly reports from women, reminding us of the sexual harassment and abuse that have been such a part of our culture.

And closer to home....

A 14-year-old dies tragically from a bike accident,

A family member continues to struggle with the disease of addiction, another with depression, and for many, loss that is a part of life is particularly sharp this time of year. O yes, the prophet Isaiah's cry is our cry as well, "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down, God. Come down and make things right! As you did in days before, why aren't you here now? Why don't we see you? Tear open the heavens and come down!"

Maybe one year we could hold this worship service on the first Sunday in Advent in the evening when it's dark outside. That would allow a visual for how we as church, not as secular society but as church, begin this season. We could sit in the darkness that is the despair that is the sadness that is the cause of age old lament. Darkness. And into that darkness we as God's people light one candle. That first candle, so aptly in our tradition we name that first candle Hope. And we know that when it is the darkest is when light shines all the brighter and one candle can light up the world.

The prophet Isaiah does not end with that heart wrenching lament. He begins there and then goes on. He goes on to name a God who has been with God's people throughout history, even when God seemed absent, the prophet names that faith core; 'You are the potter, we are the clay, we are all your people.'

The image of potter with clay, an image that is often used during the season of Lent, seems so appropriate for this time of Advent. I learned recently that the job of the potter is to keep the clay centered on the wheel, that the tendency of the clay, if not 'thrown' right on the center of the wheel, is to fly off in one direction or the other. And I thought to myself in relation to we faithful church members, "Ain't that the truth?" How we as the clay need the presence, the loving hands of God if you will, to surround us, to keep us centered, and without that, we go flying off in one direction or another.

Into a time of darkness, we hear the reminder from Isaiah of God's loving presence centering us, 'we are all your children'. Can we, like Zechariah, also hear those first words spoken from the visiting angel, "Do not be afraid." Always the first words from God's messengers, "Do not be afraid." Words to center us like the potter's hands.

Author Marcia McFee writes, "Despair is the opposite of hope that is derived from fear."

We, using the words of poet Wendell Berry, "wake in despair in the night at the least sound in fear of what our lives and our children's lives may be" .

The first words from those winged messengers of God is: "Do not be afraid." We live in a culture of fear and need so desperately to hear the angels' messages to not be afraid, so that we are able to turn from despair and live in hope of our faith, that a baby was

born, that God did ‘come down’ and was and is and will always be the Emmanuel, ‘God with us’.

How often do we allow our fear to color our world with despair so much so that we can't see the hope right in front of us? There is a parable of a woman who was lost in the desert, hungry and thirsty. Ahead she saw an oasis but could not convince herself to believe it was real. It's only a mirage, she said. How could that small patch of beauty exist in such a wasteland? She walked toward it, all the while not believing in its existence. Later, two other hikers came upon the oasis and found the body of the woman right there. How odd, they thought. It looked like she died of starvation and dehydration when she was right next to a cool pool of water and a tree loaded with dates hanging down right above her head.

If we can hear the holy messengers from God, perhaps we can more easily see the presence of the Emmanuel/God with us now and live as a people of hope. And in these days of waiting, we have a role as well, not to wait passively. The angels bring a message, they also invite participation. The message is ‘Do not be afraid, God is doing such and such.’ And ‘you are a part of it.’ Get over your fear because God is in need of you. God is in need of you to help bring more hope into the world! Those angels among us include us as well. We're not only receivers of the message but bearers of the message, living lives of faith, flying in the face of fear, boldly carrying the message to others to stand tall, work for what is right, live so that others see God's presence in the world, name the Christ child in each child met, step out in hope – knowing, knowing with our hearts that even just one light that shines casts out darkness. Ours is not the hope of riches nor personal success, nor getting everything on our Christmas list nor expecting this world's ride we are on to be smooth. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “We (meaning people of faith) must accept finite disappointment but never lose infinite hope. The story of the babe born long ago and to be born again and again in our hearts, provides this infinite hope.

May we hear the message of the angels among us and not be afraid so that we can live lives of hope and bring more hope to the world!

I believe we have sung the following Taize song before but it's not real familiar. I hope that by Christmas Eve the words and the melody surround you: In the Lord, I'll be ever thankful, in the Lord, we will rejoice. Look to God, do not be afraid, lift up your voices the Lord is near, lift up your voices, indeed, the Lord is near.