

Message of Hope – Isaiah 64:1-9

Isaiah has been called the Gospel of the Old Testament. This book is full of wonderful glimpses of the coming Messiah, God's deliverer. But what we sometimes forget is that the context within which this book is written is anything but happy times. In fact, things looked pretty hopeless to God's people.

Imagine war devastating your land, destroying homes, crops and cities. Your family is forced to march with just the clothes on their backs over hundreds of miles to a new land. There you will live for decades. Children are born there, grandchildren as well. You tell them about where you came from, how beautiful your city was, how fertile and productive the land around it. You dream about home and wish you could see it again before you die...

And then you get word that you can go home. The excitement is palatable. You make the long journey home with your family, talking about what to expect when you get there. But what you find is barren ground and a destroyed city. The place is unrecognizable.

Despair settles in like a huge cloud. God feels miles away, unconcerned about His people. It does not feel like God is listening at all to what His people are saying. In despair, the people cry out to God this lament: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!" "God, please show yourself! Please do something! Please shine some light in the midst of our darkness and despair."

This cry for hope is recorded in Isaiah 64:1-9. Walk with me on a journey from despair to hope.

Read: Isaiah 64:1-9

In verse one we read those words, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down." Can you picture what they have in mind? It is like a knife cutting through the side of your tent so you can get out. "Cut open the veil of heaven that separates us from you, God, and come to us." If God was present, they reason, everyone would know because the mountains would tremble before him. He mustn't be here because we are not in a happy place...

Funny how we assume that when things are not going the way we think they should that God has abandoned us? COVID comes and some people are asking, "Where is God?" You lose your job: where is God? You get a bad report from the doctor concerning your health: where is God? The children are wandering away from the faith, your grandchildren are doing their own thing instead of God's thing: where is God?

We tend to think it is God that has moved, when really it is usually us!

In verses 2-4 we are reminded that when God shows up people know it. Just like kindling makes a fire hot so you can boil water, so the enemies of God quake when God shows up. They admit, in verse 3, that God doesn't always do things the way we think he might. Sometimes he asked to reduce an army before going to battle. Sometimes he let one person turn the tide of the

battle. Sometimes he let a woman be the hero, and at other times he let nature destroy the enemy. God is powerful, but He does things his way.

How important is that for us to remember today? We must remember God does things His way. For instance, can God heal every disease? Absolutely. Does he heal everyone who comes to him with sickness and disease? No. Does this mean God is not there, or God does not care? No. God often works through medicine today, and through the hands of a skilled surgeon. It is God who gave these men and women their skill, whether they acknowledge it or not. And God gave them this knowledge and skill for a purpose – to bring healing to our broken bodies.

Can doctors fix everything? No. Does God sometimes bypass the doctors and heal a person? Most certainly. How many of you have experienced the healing touch of God on your life? I would expect many of you have a testimony of the touch of Jesus to restore your health. I think back to what the doctors told my mom when I was little, that the bronchitis I experienced as an infant had scarred my lungs and therefore I would never run or play sports. Somewhere along the way God touched my lungs because I played every sport our little Jr. High school offered, ran a road race, jogged and even played college soccer. In all my recent visits to the doctor I have never once heard him say there was a problem with my lungs. I have only one explanation for that – the touch of God.

The people recall the way God had revealed Himself as the one true God through the miracles that he did on their behalf, but noted the miracles only came as the people waited on God.

Now their attention moves from what they expect God to do to what He expects of them. They recognized that God helped those who did what was right, living according to God's ways (v. 5). It was when the people turned away from God and sinned that they saw God's anger revealed and his hand of salvation removed.

At this point the lament takes a turn, and instead of blaming God for abandoning them, they recognize that they are the ones who have turned the wrong way. It is their sin that has put the barrier up between them and God. Even their best efforts to be good are as filthy rags (v. 6).

The real problem is not in God, but in them. "No one calls on your name, or strives to take hold of you. You have hidden your face from us and given us over to our sins." (v. 7)

What a terrible place to be in – God allowing us to stay in our sins. God is saying, "You want to live without me – you think you can make it by yourself – okay, I release you. Try."

What happens when God allows sin to do its work in our lives? Things do not go well. Sin promises much – you can fib a little, you can cut corners with that project, you can pocket that money and no one will know, you can spend time with that person who is not your spouse, you can ignore God and it will all work out okay... but it doesn't. Sin ultimately delivers ruin. In the end, the wages of sin is death.

Notice that the confession is communal – “our sins.” In North America we each tend to think we are the center of the universe and everything revolves around us as individuals. My personal rights and freedoms come before what is right and good for the community. This mentality is what makes it hard in times like today where we all must work together to see the pandemic come under control.

We used to laugh at a plaque that hung in our kitchen that said, “If momma ain’t happy, no one is happy.” Most people today seem to live with a similar motto that says, “If I ain’t happy then no one else can be either...”

But the Bible is always calling us to community. God is building a people, and we can go together in victory or defeat. We may have to recognize that as a community we need to confess some sins.

It is easy to look at our country and find many things we can confess as sins – things we all share by simply being Canadian: a foreign policy that exports abortion, and an internal policy that promotes the killing of babies and adults. We could confess our sins against the indigenous peoples. We could confess our greed and selfishness that often destroys our land. We could confess our lack of concern for those with mental health issues who now live on our streets and in our back alleys.

We have much we could confess as a nation. As a city we share many of the same sins, and no doubt a whole bunch more.

And even as a church community, we must confess we do not always reach to the lost of our community as we should. We confess we do not pray as we should. We confess we do not always love as we should...

As the people who have returned to Jerusalem enter into confession they see themselves as they really are – people who deserve nothing but what they got. They deserved to be in exile and they deserved to lose their beautiful city. They were sinners and even at their best they were as soiled rags.

Today’s message is supposed to be on hope. There seems no hope to this point, just a sense of separation from God and a sobering reality that we are never good enough to deserve God’s blessings. We are sinners....

When God gets us to this place of humility and confession, things can and will change.

There seems to be a pause between verses 7 and 8, and then we pick up a new theme with the word, “Yet...” or “But...” depending on your translation. Both are transition words, and both change the direction of the discussion. We have seen the bad news, now it is time for some good news, for Hope!

The Good News is God is our Father, and he is a potter.

Nothing has changed in their circumstances. They are still standing looking over a ruined city, destroyed homes and devastated lands. Food and shelter and the basics of life will be hard to secure. They are still tired and worn from the long journey from Babylon.

But everything looks better when they get their eyes off their circumstances and onto God.

There is hope when they start to really see who God is.

God is their Father. This is about relationship. God loves them DESPITE their failings. Yes they have sinned but God hasn't given up on them. They are still his children and he will care for them in his own way. They are loved, and God will not turn his back on his family – never.

Hope begins when we see who God is, and what kind of a God he is. He is our Father, which Jesus reinforced even as he taught us to pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven...

They also saw God is a potter, and they are the clay. God can mold and make his people as he sees fit. He will take the circumstances of life and use them to shape us to be the kind of people he desires us to be – loving, patient, kind, compassionate, joyful, peaceful, good and self controlled people. We must accept the things God allows in our lives and see what we can learn from those things. This potter loves all his handiwork!

What is our identity? We are God's people. That helped turn the lament around so that there could be praise. Today we also need to remember who we are. We are God's people because of our faith in Jesus for salvation. We are sons and daughters of the one true God. We are the redeemed, the ones bought from sin and given to God through Christ's death and resurrection.

The ancient people of God started with lament, turned to confession and found hope in their identity, remembering who they were according to God.

We may not find our homes shattered, or our city in ruins and our shops all destroyed. We may not be coming back from 70 years of exile, but we too may have thoughts that God has forgotten us. Some are looking to Christmas with little hope. It has been hard year, and now we may not be able to gather with family and friends as we want to. Some know the pain of loss, and there will be an empty chair at the Christmas table this year. Some are very lonely because of the separation policies. Some are frustrated with COVID and just want to get on with life.

Friends, this advent, this season of looking forward to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, this time of preparation, we remember who we are, and who God is. We may have sin to confess, but we know God is the Father waiting with open arms. We have the advantage over those returned exiles of Isaiah's time because we know so much more about God because of Jesus, who told us, “When you see me you have seen the Father” (John 14:9).

We may not like all the things happening around us, but hold fast to this truth: we are still the children of God through our faith in Jesus, and he will never leave us or forsake us. **Let this truth inspire hope in you today and throughout this Advent season.**