

Trinity United Methodist Church

November 29, 2020

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9 (NIV)

1 Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! **2** As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! **3** For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

4 Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. **5** You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? **6** All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

7 No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins. **8** Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. **9** Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

I know for most of us this year, Thanksgiving was not exactly the same as it has been in years past. This year my family and I did not get to go to the Bishop's house for Thanksgiving dinner. And if you missed that sermon from a while back, my mother's maiden name is Bishop. The first time that I put that on Facebook—*"We're going to the Bishop's house for Thanksgiving!"*—I had so many clergy friends that took that hook, line and sinker. I had great fun with that on Facebook that year.

But alas, we didn't go to the Bishop's house for Thanksgiving dinner this year. In years past, that was a rather complex event. Mom would spend most of the day cooking and preparing several dishes; last year *half* the dishes, and then she would have to figure out how to keep everything warm for the hour's drive from their house to my uncle's house outside of Richmond. There, many years, we had to figure out how to fit upwards of a dozen people around—it was a huge dining room table, but one table nonetheless. My aunt was not a believer in a separate kids' table. She wanted everybody at the same table.

We ended up, after visiting and helping with dishes and so forth, we would usually wind up getting home, back to Mom and Dad's house, somewhat late. Then Bekah and my mom would then head out to do Black Friday shopping. It wasn't all just for us; it was for Angel Tree kids as well.

But this year was different. There were just seven of us around the table, and we had lunch instead of dinner. And if Mom said it one time at the end of the meal, she must have said it a half dozen times, how much she was looking forward to *relaxing* the rest of the day by having lunch instead of dinner. My family and I were back home here in Smithfield by dinner time, where we ate leftovers that we'd packed up from Mom and Dad's house. And that day the majority of the shopping had already happened during the day, on the couch on the computer. True, we missed seeing my uncle and my cousins, but this Thanksgiving was very nice and simple.

It reminds me of back at the beginning of the pandemic, a friend in Northern Virginia commenting how their family wall calendar, one of these dry erase monstrosities on the kitchen wall, where each family member had their own color of dry erase marker to mark their sports games and events and appointments and so forth, and it was always chock full. She commented how all of a sudden at the beginning of the pandemic, as everything got canceled, it went empty, and how simultaneously she missed all the activity, but it was also nice to slow down. To not have life driven by a calendar. To live life more simply.

For all the complexities and hardships of this pandemic, we've seen all kinds of ways that families who live together and were often ships passing in the night because of all the various activities are actually finding ways, were forced, to spend more time together. I notice more posts of people spending more time out in nature. I know my family certainly did so, as many indoor fun places were closed or severely limited in attendance. In short, many aspects of our lives have gotten simpler because of 2020 and the year of the pandemic.

And so that leads to our Advent and Christmas theme of "Simply Christmas." We know, just as Thanksgiving was different, Christmas will be different for us as well. How

do you do socially-distanced Christmas caroling as a youth group? How do you do Christmas during a pandemic? Many of us are already not looking forward to the ways in which COVID is “limiting us in our Christmas.” But maybe it’s helping us get back to the true meaning of Christmas, Christmas that is much simpler, indeed. After all, many of us have bemoaned over the last several years how Christmas has gotten over-commercialized. How we get over-stressed during Christmas, rushing around from gathering to gathering and making sure we’ve got all the gifts. For many of us, it becomes the busiest time of the year.

And so therefore, Advent has often been pitched as an antidote to all of that. In fact, in church world there’s often a bit of a war around Christmas and Advent. It’s not the war *on* Christmas that has been popularized in the media for the last several years. Friends, we don’t care what Starbucks puts or doesn’t put on their coffee cups. It’s overpriced coffee. If you want to drink it, drink it. Okay? End of discussion. But I digress.

This war is between Advent purists and Christmas enthusiasts. I have clergy friends, I fondly rib them and call them “Advent purists.” Those who insist on the churches not singing any Christmas carols before Christmas Eve or Christmas day. Not even putting up Christmas trees before that time. And yes, you can imagine how well that’s working for them in their churches.

But Advent is always meant to be a time of waiting. A time of expectation. A time of introspection. And for me, at least, this year means something different. Because this year of 2020 has seemed like one big Advent, hasn’t it? We’ve been doing a whole lot of waiting. Waiting to get out, waiting to get rid of these face masks, waiting...and waiting. We expect to be able to celebrate when we can finally get rid of these things and get back to normal, whatever *normal* might be.

But it speaks to the idea that theologians and pastors have shared for years: that the Christian life that we lead, even in normal times, is a life of Advent. Because Advent, especially in the early weeks of Advent, is really more about the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Christians, we live in the now and the not yet. Jesus has already come in Bethlehem long ago, but *not yet* in his second coming, and so we live in between, and we wait.

In the gospel lesson on this first Sunday of Advent, Jesus tells the parable of the master who goes away and leaves his servants to take care of the place with the expectation to “be prepared for when I come back.” And he takes so long in coming back that some of the servants give up, and they say, “Well, he hasn’t come back yet. He’s never coming back. Forget it. Let’s just live life like we want to.” But there are those who stay faithful and stay prepared and ready. And who does the master find faithful when he does finally return?

In all the waiting—we know from this year—it gets boring. It gets humdrum. Same ins, same outs. And so we want to escape. We want to escape into a fantasy world, don't we? And Christmas can become that fantasy world for us. After all, just look at all the songs that are on the radio right now and that we might love to sing along to, and how fantasy is this? *White Christmas*? When was the last time we had a white Christmas in these parts? Right? How fantastical is that, that we would actually have a white Christmas in southeast Virginia? Yeah, right. That's not reality. Our kids dance in productions of ballet with toy soldiers coming to life and mouse kings, after all. How fantastical is that?

Even in our Christian Christmas celebrations, it seems that we escape into the world of this picturesque Bethlehem, picturesque in our minds from long ago. You know, snow falling all around and so forth. He was probably born in September, y'all, not in December; the Romans changed that. But anyway, a lesson for a different time. But we have this idealism in our minds of the sweet little baby Jesus, and we sing about Him. We sing, *The little lord Jesus, no crying He makes*. What a fantasy! Right? Babies cry! It's what they do! And Jesus was a fully human baby, and He more than likely cried, too.

We get so focused on the birth, and we forget that He grew up into a man and He's coming again. We don't necessarily want to think about that part, about that judgment part, but about that part that still brings hope. Because Advent starts out about hope. And this little baby Jesus lying in a manger in his golden fleece diapers didn't just come out of nowhere. He comes in context from the Old Testament, from Isaiah, and we're going to spend Advent in Isaiah.

In the historical context, the kingdom of Israel that had been split into two rested on a trade route between Egypt to the south and northern neighbors, kingdoms to the north. And if you controlled the trade route, you controlled the money. And so little old Israel was always getting picked on by their neighbors, who wanted to control them and control the money. First it was the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, who conquered Assyria and then conquered Jerusalem and sent everybody into exile.

But then the Persians took over. And when the Persians took over they allowed some of the exiles to return back home, to begin rebuilding Jerusalem. It was a time of hope and a time of expectation. But imagine living through all of this time. Imagine living through so much war. Imagine being torn from your homes. And by the way, this took place over hundreds of years. And friends, we've only been *nine months* into this. We, particularly Americans, have a short-term memory.

It was a dark time. But prophets like Isaiah began to speak hope. They began to speak of God's servant, an heir to the throne of David who would rule everlasting with justice from Jerusalem. A king who would conquer all of Israel's enemies once and for

all. Who would bring everlasting peace once and for all. Isaiah spoke of the Messiah, God's Anointed One, Emmanuel, God With Us. Isaiah spoke of hope.

And the reading for today comes at the end of that whole Old Testament story. The people are returning to rebuild Jerusalem in hope and expectation. But evidently they still hadn't learned their lesson of why God said they went into exile to begin with—because they had wandered from Him.

So Isaiah prophesied of God's judgment yet again. He cries out to God to have mercy on his people, for God has been so good to Israel in the past. And yet Israel has rebelled against God and become His enemy yet again. Now Israel remembers the mighty deliverance of the exodus and longs for those great days to return. Even if their ancestors, Abraham and Jacob, disown Israel, certainly God would have mercy, no?

Israel attributes everything to God, even their hardheartedness and their disobedience and lack of faith. And now Israel begs God to rescue them, to restore and to rule yet again.

In today's reading, Israel asks God to intervene by his mountain-moving power and like fire in his holiness. For they know that God is the only one who can act in this way. God is the only one who can reveal himself in justice to those who wait for him. So Israel admits their sin and their guilt; even their best actions are filthy. They feel that they are dying in their sin and that God has turned away and let them face their fate. Yet, they plead that they are still in God's hands, for they trust that God can still reform them, like a potter with clay.

Maybe that might be our prayer this Advent as well. For ourselves, for our church, for our nation, for our world. That we are yet still in God's hands, and so may God still reform us into His people, like a potter with clay. Because you don't have to look far on the news that things still seem rather dark and bleak and hopeless. Yet there is still hope.

Fleming Rutledge is a pastor and theologian who writes a great Advent sermon where she says that "Advent begins in the dark. Not in the lights that we put on our trees or hang on the houses. Not in the festive, happy, joyous songs we sing, not in the merriment. But Advent truly begins in the dark."

It's a proverb from outside the Bible, but one of my favorites that was popularized in the *Batman: Dark Knight* trilogy, where Harvey Dent said, "The night is darkest before the dawn." Because however dark it gets, dawn always breaks. It might be cloudy, it might be foggy, like it's been the last several mornings around here, but the dawn always finds a way. Light always finds a way. Hope always finds a way.

In another one of my favorite movies, *The Shawshank Redemption*, the main character, Andy Dufresne, is thrown into solitary confinement, in “the hole,” for longer than any other Shawshank prisoner has known to be in there. And when he gets out his friends are asking him, “What was it like? It must have been absolutely horrible for you.” And Andy says, “No, it wasn’t that bad. For all that they could take away from me, they can’t take away hope.”

Friends, indeed, 2020 has been one long Advent. And if you were one of those people that put your Christmas decorations up early and started jamming to Christmas music in July, you know what? Good for you. Because we need joy and happiness this year. But friends, we also need Advent more than ever. Because after 2020, after this pandemic, there will be something else that tries to drag us down. There will be some other adversity working against us. There will be some other darkness working to extinguish the light. There will be some other sin or temptation drawing us away from the light.

But remember, hope is not found in any of the circumstances that we face, but in the simple fact that God still reigns. That God will still deliver his people. And when we turn to God, it’s never too late for God to still reform us and shape us into the people God wants us to be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.