

“A Prophet’s Plea”

November 30, 2014

Christ Comes series – 1st Sunday in Advent

What do you think of when you hear the word “prophet?” A prophet is someone who speaks for God, someone who spots the gap between what we believe and how we behave and drives God’s Word in between, someone who tells the truth. Prophets are social critics. Scholar Walter Brueggeman says that a prophet is like a pick-ax - picking away at how things are. Prophets offer both judgment and hope.

Isaiah shows another role of the prophet: someone who speaks for the people. Isaiah pleads with God: *O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down*. This phrase took hold of my heart, and I felt like Isaiah spoke for the people in his time and in ours.

Brueggeman claims that we’ve neglected lamentation, so we don’t know what to do when things go wrong. But he also says that Isaiah is a poet. And poets help us to view things differently. Different metaphors and images help us to live our faith more deeply. And so we’ll use Isaiah in Advent to help us prepare for the coming of Christ.

O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down. There are times I’d like God to come down and fix all the junk going on in my life and in the world, to make it all better. It’s difficult to proclaim a Gospel of life and hope when we don’t feel it. It’s difficult to praise God when we don’t feel God’s presence. And yet we care about what we see around us - despair, pain, and grief. And we’re called to respond to it with the hope that we have in God.

Most scholars believe that this portion of Isaiah is recorded when some of the Israelites have returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. It’s a time of restoration for Israel. They’re back home. So, you’d think that everything’s going great, right?

Well, not exactly. Even though they’re back in Jerusalem, it’s not the same. The city looks different. The Temple has been destroyed. And there are problems with keeping faith in God. Some have begun to worship Babylonian gods. There are debates about social life and religious practice: who belongs, who doesn’t, who’s right, who’s not.

Coming home was supposed to make life better, but it didn’t. The world was still imperfect. Reality wasn’t what the Israelites expected. It was hard work to rebuild and come back together as a community. They were discouraged and disillusioned. It was hard to rely God’s grace in hard times.

So Isaiah prays to God. This is his plea, but also the people’s plea for help. The real world isn’t looking good, so God, *come down with power and might like*

you did for our ancestors – in cloud and fire! Then maybe we'd get it. Then maybe we'd act like you're real. God had made a covenant with Israel and had come in mighty ways, and Isaiah asks for their covenant to be honored. They need a reminder of who God is – of what a mighty God they serve so they can believe again. They need hope!

This year, Isaiah's plea may resonate with you. Maybe it's Ebola, ISIS, Ferguson, violence, financial difficulties, uncertainty, illness, other personal stuff – we want God to show up and help us! Is God absent from the world? Is God interested? Are we impatient for God to show up? Or is God already here?

We gather on this Sunday between Black Friday and Cyber Monday. Some of us are asking, "Where are you, God?" We don't hear a happy carol, but Isaiah's plea for God to come down and be present with God's people. What would we do if God came down? What would God see in our lives? How would God respond to injustice, prejudice, hate, violence, and hunger?

Isaiah pleads with God to come down and be present, then he goes on. Remember that prophets also tell the truth, and Isaiah holds nothing back. He describes the people as dirty rags and leaves blowing in the wind. *God, we are sinners. Save us from ourselves. We know you are faithful. Help us.*

I wonder if we can really pray all of Isaiah's prayer. Can we yearn so deeply for Christ's coming that we say, "O that you would tear open the heavens...! Can we admit that we are in deep need of a Savior? And if we can't pray it, then what do we have to do to get to that place?

Perhaps it's a question of hope – that we could put our hope in Jesus – even in that baby born in Bethlehem. Perhaps it's a question of being open enough to trust in what God's gift of Jesus means to us – that we could have new life and hope, forgiveness and grace, salvation and wholeness.

The story is told of a soldier who asked his pastor whether God would forgive a sinner. His answer came in a question: "Tell me, if your cloak were torn, would you throw it away?" "Oh, no," the soldier said. "I would mend it and wear it again." And the man said: "Well, if you care that much for your cloak, do you think God does not care as much for a creature?"

Can we embrace God's grace for us? Advent begins with a lament and a call for God to come down because we need God's help to overcome our sin. We need God to be the One who loves, forgives, and guides us. We need God to be the Potter while we are the clay. God is our Creator and Redeemer, but we have to be open to being remolded and remade in God's image and God's way.

When Advent was first introduced in the 4th century, it was a season of fasting and a time of preparation for baptism – similar to Lent. Can you imagine fasting right now? Can you imagine us doing less and eating less? Can you imagine taking time to reflect on our walk with God and making changes that we

need to make rather than a free-for-all of overindulgence, doing too much, buying too much? Can you imagine waiting for Christmas with time for peace and reflection?

Advent is a time to wait – it's true – but we can't be passive. We have to listen. We have to watch. We have to work on making room for Jesus to dwell in us. We have to believe that God is the One who restores us. Sometimes I've prayed that God would fix everyone else except me. But Isaiah calls us to pray, "God, come down - it's not just everyone else who needs you, but we do, too! We need you!"

That means clearing out sin and admitting our need for God to make us new. That means sharing the meaning of this season with others who are seeking to find new life in Jesus Christ. It means living in expectant hope – living as if God's Kingdom is truly coming. It means even expecting that God is up to something – that God may show up and work a miracle! We need to be people of prayer, and not just prayers for ourselves, but prayers for the world God loves. Friends, prayer is a powerful tool that all of us have to share our faith.

Advent is a time to tend to our faith. Isaiah's plea to God is for help, but he also wants to remember who God really is – powerful, mighty, ready to forgive and redeem. We need that reminder, too. God is the potter. We are the clay.

The video we saw today reminds us that our God is the Potter. Today is a day for God to re-form, re-make, re-mold, and re-shape us. No amount of retail therapy or good food or gift-giving can fill the need we have for hope, peace, love, and joy. Only God can fill it.

We certainly can enjoy the season and all it brings, but we also claim that we stand in need of saving. We need to be made new again and again. The One who comes will fill us with what we need. God is able to put us back together and use us to shine light and offer hope. God created the universe - and God recreates us daily in grace given in Jesus.

O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down. Thank God! Christ comes. And this Advent is time to reflect on that truth. What we prepare for - what we hope for - is that when we gather on Christmas - we get it again - that God would come down to meet us where we are - to be with us - to be one of us.

Someone wrote, "In spite of our best efforts and worst failures, God is with us. And even as we cry for God to come down, we can take great joy in knowing that God is already here."

Christ comes! Thanks be to God. Amen.