

Isaiah 64:1-9
Advent 1-B-2020
“Christ Our Hope”
Rev. Randy Smith

I suspect that you have all noticed how, over the months of the COVID era we've been living through, there have been a lot of attempts to make it all at least a little more bearable by trying to have a **sense of humor** about it, a number of these appearing on social media.

Some examples:

- Q: If 2020 were a drink, what drink would it be? A: A colonoscopy prep.
- Travel Review: "2020: 1-star only. Very Bad. Would not recommend going there."
- Man holding up sign in a Zoom meeting: "I can't wait to never use Zoom again!"
- So far, 2020 is like looking both ways before crossing the street and then getting hit by airplane.
- "2020: The Movie". Written by Stephen King. Directed by Quentin Tarantino.
- If 2020 were a Math problem: If you're going down a river at 2 MPH, and your canoe loses a wheel, how much pancake mix would you need to re-shingle your roof?
- "I am NOT turning back my clock on November 1. I do NOT need an extra hour of 2020!"
- "In other news, the 7 Dwarfs have been advised that, as of today, they can only meet in groups of 6. One of them is not Happy."
- "I'm going to say up all night on New Year's Eve this year. Not to see a New Year in, but to make sure this one leaves!"

Of course, all of these are a classic case of "**gallows humor**", which Webster defines as "*grim and ironic humor in a desperate or hopeless situation*". Which is the way in which scores of millions of our fellow Americans have experienced this year, whether on account of being **devastated financially** -- by loss of employment, or loss of a whole business; or devastated **psychologically**, those who are part of the 300% rise in CDC reports of clinical *anxiety*, and a 400% rise in reports of clinical *depression*, and a *doubling* of the reports of *suicidal* thoughts; or devastated **emotionally** by loss of a loved one to COVID-19. For these folks, there is nothing humorous about the year 2020 whatsoever. In fact, it's just been one big **hopeless mess**.

And yet, despite everything, here we are, at a major turn in the Church's worship calendar -- the first Sunday of Advent -- lighting the first candle in the Advent Wreath, and proclaiming it to be a symbol of "Christ, our **Hope**", *just* as we do every year, *irrespective* of what year it is. And this is important, because it helps us see that the Church keeps a different calendar than the world around us. We never considered, e.g., calling off Advent this year because it's 2020. Because the Church believes that, by virtue of the **Incarnation** -- God taking on human

form, entering into history -- God has now *commandeered* time, making *every* year, above all else, into another *opportunity* to tell **God's story**, viz., the story of God's work in both *creating* and *redeeming* the world through Jesus Christ.

So today, *we* as the Church begin *again* to tell this story, both to remind *ourselves*, and to witness to *others*, of what we believe to be -- *underlying* all the present circumstances of our life in this world -- *always* and *abidingly* **true**.

In the reading from Isa. 64 this morning, we encounter the Covenant People of God at a point in time when things seemed **hopeless mess**. We are at the point in their history when -- following Judea's devastating defeat at the hands of the Babylonian Empire in 587 BC, and their subsequent Exile to Babylon (modern day Iraq) for nearly three generations -- they have now returned home, to Jerusalem, with the intention of having their capital city **soon rebuilt**, its reconstruction being the centerpiece of their hope of rebuilding their whole nation. For a variety of reasons, however, their hopes are soon frustrated, and then begin to look unachievable. They have come, i.e., to **the end** of all *they* know to do to try to propel themselves forward.

And so they cry out to God in the form of what is called a "**communal lament**", the whole community gathered to pray, for God to **help**, and for that help to come in such a *dramatic* fashion that all who witness it will know, *unequivocally*, that it has come from God. The central question of their existence at this point in their history is: "**Where is God?**" Why is it, i.e., that just when we thought God was *with* us -- to prosper us, by turning history in our favor and granting us the end of Exile from our homeland -- we *now* find we have no sense *at all* that God is with us? So, God, **wake up!** **Tear through** whatever *barrier* is keeping you separated from us, and *come*, and *deliver* us! You've done this sort of thing in the *past* -- *surely* you remember! So do this sort of thing *again!* *Please*.

What, the people are wondering, is the **problem**? Okay, *maybe* the problem is **us**. Maybe we *sinned*. But -- sort of like a spouse who, when confessing to adultery, is compelled to point out that the other spouse's behavior was a contributing factor in the infidelity -- we sinned, they say, because you "hid yourself" O God (v. 5)! If you had stayed *with us*, well, we could have done better!

This **partial** confession, however, soon becomes **full**: the truth is, the people say, " We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth" (v. 6). "We *see* now that there is *nothing* we can do to save ourselves," they say in effect. "Even our *best* efforts only make matters *worse*." And then they add, "**But**...you are our **Father**. We are the **clay**, and you are our **potter**; we are all the work of your hand." Isa. 64 *begins and ends* with a **plea**. The *first* is for God to "Come down!" The *last* is simply, " Do not ...remember iniquity forever."

That first plea, you need to understand, was pretty **bold**, even *daring*. Asking God to come down. Because when God comes down, you *do* realize what God comes down to *do*, don't you? God comes down to *re-work the clay* which has -- *somehow* -- gone wrong. Become *misshapen, deformed*. In pottery terms, that means taking the whole mass of clay and throwing it down hard on the wheel, in order to *start over again* -- the clay's *previous* form now entirely *gone*.

In the worship season of Advent, the Church pauses to remember that we are living *between* the two advents of Christ: the first, of course, was Christmas. The second is still ahead of us. It is this *second* advent -- what has come to be called the "Second Coming" (cf. "come again, to judge the living and dead" in the Apostles' Creed) -- which is the **focus** of the Advent season: each year, we ask again what the Covenant People of God were asking in Isa. 64 long ago, *viz.*, for God to "**come down**".

But, I wonder, do we really **mean** it? Do *we* really want that? Do *I* really want that? Who among us, after all, is willing to be "clay", and allow the "Potter" to **entirely** have his way with us, meaning that we surrender everything -- all we've achieved, all we still want to achieve -- everything we call "our life", and allow God to start *over* with us? **Who among us is really seeking to grant the Lord this measure of unqualified, unstinting submission?**

More importantly, are we as **the whole Church** willing to make this same kind of surrender of all we've come to call "Church" -- everything we've come to call "ministry" and "mission", or "church business as usual" -- and allow God to start *over* with us? **This is nothing less, by the way, than the essential question facing the whole Church in 21st-c. America.**

The only way we can do this, whether as individual followers of Christ or as his whole Church, is to make the **confession** made by the Covenant People *long ago* our *own*, and acknowledge that even "our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth". It's *not* that we as the Church don't do **good**, both for ourselves and for others -- we *absolutely* do. It's also *not* that we don't do *enough* good. **The truth is that it's not our goodness that God is interested in.**

Why?

Because doing what *we* call "good" too often falls short of doing God's will, because we haven't *first* allowed God, the Potter, to **re-work** our lives, as individuals -- *viz.*, to *transform* how we see, understand, and choose to relate with the world around us -- *and* to **re-work** our life-together as the Church. Such that our desire as individuals to follow Christ is continually **thwarted** by our **stubborn and proud insistence** on deciding for *ourselves*, and living by our *own* wisdom. *And* such that, in so much of our doing good as the Church, we end up *inevitably* doing good only *for* others, rather than *with* others, in the kind of **community with**

others which actually makes a difference in the world, and so makes the world new.

"The hope for us, says the Church in Advent, is that we are out of hope, and we know it. We know, in our better moments," Will Willimon says, "where our quest for **self-affirmation** has left us." And once we embrace this as true, then *Christ* can become our hope.

The U.S., says Dr. Leana Wen of GWU School of Public Health is presently "rounding the corner into a **calamity**," over the next several months, in terms of skyrocketing mortality rates from COVID-19. The new vaccines, she says, will help us, but they won't help us much before late spring or summer. This would seem to make the COVID era – in which we have experienced so much in the way of helplessness -- would be a good time for us to acknowledge that "We *see* now that there is *nothing* we can do to save ourselves", and make a fresh effort to become the "clay" which the Potter can take hold of more fully, and refashion into something both more beautiful – what the "clay" was meant to be – and also more useful to God.