



God in the People

YEARNING FOR PRESENCE

ISAIAH 64:1-9

**God in the people:
*Yearning for Presence****

Listen. Listen to the prophet, Isaiah. Can you hear it? Something's wrong. Something's very wrong. Listen to the moan -- the cry of distress that calls out from the pages of scripture in this morning's reading.

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains
would quake at your presence...! ~Isaiah 64:1-2*

This is a desperate voice, a voice of one at the end of his rope. This is the voice of someone who is yearning for a change, a rescue, a complete reversal of fortunes. I know this prayer – this lament – and some of you do too. “God, why don't you come down and do something! If this is life, God, then you can have it!” It's the voice of someone in need of a savior.

Our reading this morning is from the second to last chapter in the book of Isaiah; a passage that dates to the time after the exile, when the people of Israel had finally returned home to Jerusalem. The whole time they had been in Babylon, all the people could think about -- and dream about -- was coming home. They dreamed of returning to their homes and their fields. They prayed about returning to their beloved Temple. They dreamed about returning to life as they remembered it. Sounds like our 10 lepers from last week, right?

But guess what -- when they did come home, their dreams collided with stark reality, and the dissonance between them was heartbreaking. They found their city in a shambles; they found their holy Temple, the place where the very presence of the Lord God was supposed to dwell, in ruins. They were devastated. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

Looking at the world around us, I think it might be reasonable to come to the same conclusion. Something IS wrong. Something is very wrong. There's the wrath of nature: hurricanes and volcanoes. There are wildfires and earthquakes and floods. There is famine and disease. Hardly a Sunday goes by when one of these isn't lifted up for our prayer. And then there is the suffering brought on by human behavior:

There are wars and rumors of wars. There is corruption and greed. There is fear and anxiety. There is a grossly unfair allocation of resources resulting in a tiny fraction of the population amassing a huge majority of the earth's resources and wealth, while the vast majority of the population has to stretch and share our leftovers more and more every year.

And the term Black Friday, which is supposed to point toward the hopes of our retailers ending the year in black ink and not in red, takes on new meaning as stores are opening earlier and earlier. “Black Friday now starts Thursday morning at 6 am!” Something is wrong, very wrong.

And what about our own lives? We struggle every day with difficulties we know and difficulties we don't know. We struggle with illness, with depression, with grief and loss. We struggle with job insecurity, and the constant battle to make ends meet. We struggle with the loss of friendships and the loss of relationships and lovers and spouses. And we struggle with addiction.

And these are just the things we know about. We also struggle with the unknown: that vague, indefinable fear and anxiety that wakes us at 3 in the morning. "We all fade like a leaf," says the prophet, "and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (64:6b).

Poet G. K. Chesterton put it like this:

*For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.*

Something is wrong, very wrong. The prophet weeps and wails and wallows in the uncomfortable truth of Israel's own responsibility for the mess it's in. He acknowledges the gap between where the people want to be and where they are, as well as the gap – the chasm between who they are as creatures, and who God is as Creator.

Given that chasm, the prophet gives voice to our yearning for the presence of a savior, the time when Someone will come in great majesty and splendor, with unmistakable power and force, tearing open the very heavens to set things right. I know that prayer. And you do, too.

But listen. Listen, as something turns -- something shifts for the prophet. And instead of big, scary, apocalyptic, 'end-it-all' imagery, suddenly the scale is intimate and personal.

*Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
We are the clay, and you are our potter.
We are all the work of your hand. ~Isaiah 64:8*

Suddenly, instead of asking God for thunder and lightning and fireworks, the prophet makes an appeal to closeness and intimacy. This voice in distress is talking about presence. He is talking about relationship. The image of God as potter and God's people as the clay breaks this passage open. It takes us into new territory. No longer are we talking about God bursting in from outside the established order. Instead, God is invited in.

What does that mean? God is the potter and we are the clay...

If God is the potter then God touches us – with both hands. We are not alone, we're not left on our own. It is not a case of God being "up there" and we're "down here." God is in contact with us -- intimately. God has God's hands on us, and we are made warm resting, cupped in God's hands.

If God is the potter, then God wants to shape us. God wants to use the events of our lives—our homes, our upbringing, our work, our relationships, our choices—to shape us, to mold and fashion us.

If God is the potter, then God wants to make something useful and beautiful from us, and it's not entirely up to us to determine just what that is. The potter works with care and precision to make us into exactly who he wants us to be. And the clay doesn't argue – much!

If God is the potter then God might need to place us in the fire in order to make us strong and durable. No one wants to be in the fire. It hurts. It burns. There's a lot of smoke in there, and it's hard to see. But when we come out – when we come out of the fire we can be stronger, more useful, and even more beautiful than when we went in.

If God is the potter, then sometimes God has to deal with the issue of shards – the broken pieces of pottery. This is not a problem for the potter. No vessel is beyond rescue. Once the pottery is broken it can be mixed in with clay that is still soft, it can be molded once again. If God is the potter, then we are never beyond God's skill to create with us.

What really strikes me about the prophet's turn from wanting God to tear open the heavens to calling upon God as potter is that it seems to get to the true root of the problem. The problems of the world are the problems of people—individual people. People called upon to join in community, yes. People called into covenant with God, yes. People joined to one another by virtue of their shared humanity -- as well as by virtue of the One who created them, yes. But individuals nonetheless. And the cataclysmic changes we are yearning for God to make all start with changes of heart, and changes of mind.

There's a song at the end of the movie, *Bedazzled*, a movie in which a sort of hapless guy looks for help from without—big, cosmic help—only to find out – and to understand at the end, that the help he needs is found deep within. The song asks,

*Did you ever think
There might be another way
To just feel better
Just feel better about today*

Ultimately the song concludes,

*If you want to be somebody else
If you're tired of fighting battles with yourself
If you want to be somebody else
Change your mind...*

This is the wisdom of the ages, from the prophets of ancient Israel to Jesus to Alcoholics Anonymous. We are all looking for that fix from outside -- that that's going to fill the empty

spot -- the pill, the job, the diet, the lottery ticket, the person who will make us just feel better about it all, especially about ourselves.

But the wisdom of the ages tells us that the God who comes—the savior who is perfectly capable of tearing open heavens, clouds, car doors and all the rest of it—prefers instead to work on us quietly, diligently, hands-on, intimately, like a potter at the wheel.

We are yearning for the presence of God, not just to tear open the heavens, but to reach into our hearts. Yes, something is wrong. We are homesick in our homes, and strangers under the sun. And no one knows how or when the sun will be darkened, when the stars begin to fall in our eyes and our souls. We might not witness a savior tearing open the heavens.

But God's goodness will pass before us. We will meet God in the still and quiet places within. We, the clay, will meet the potter, to the extent we are willing to entrust ourselves to be held, and to be handled. We will meet God, when we allow ourselves to be molded and to be shaped. We will meet God, who will knead our broken and fragmented selves together again; God, who will hold us and mold us tenderly; God, who will welcome us home at last. Thanks be to God. Amen.

* This sermon was inspired by a sermon by Rev. Pat Raube, Union Presbyterian Church, Endicott, NY