

**Sermon: December 2, 2018 (Advent 1) – Isaiah 64: 1-9**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

This is one of those weeks in which it has been somewhat tempting to just take last week's sermon and preach it again. Not because it was such a hum-dinger that it could be spoken twice, but because there is such overlap between what we explored last week about proclaiming Jesus as Lord, and today's focus on Hope, on this first Sunday of Advent.

We heard last week from Marcus Borg, who wrote, "to affirm 'Jesus is Lord' was to affirm that the emperor was not." (p.95) ... "To affirm 'Jesus is Lord' systematically subverts all other lords, including the lords of culture." (p.111) So as we look today at hope and where we might look for it, we put those words someplace we can find them later.

We also heard last week, words quoted by Martin Luther King, Jr. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." These words speak of a divine intention, the way that the God, the ultimate source of love, builds the potential to love into the very structure of life. In our time and place, where there is so much questioning of the whole notion of God, we take this statement of divine intention and also put it within easy reach.

And finally, last week we encountered a turn of phrase from Marcus Borg that takes pretty much everything I was taught at seminary about Biblical interpretation, and distils it to one sentence. When approaching the ancient sacred texts of the Bible for guidance, Borg asks this question (p.29), 'Given what their words meant for their *then*, what might their meaning be for our *now*?'"

And that question, propels us smack dab into today's reading from the 64<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah. The Jewish nation has been forcibly removed from their homeland, tried to keep the light of faith burning for some 70 years in exile, and have now found their way back to home to their beloved holy city, Jerusalem. And what they find, is a city in ruins. The first temple was destroyed. Strangers have taken over the more favourable properties and had no intention of leaving. So when we hear these words of profound yearning, of people looking heavenward and saying to God, "c'mon, God, you did it before, how about doing it again?" these are not the words of powerful people who want God to wipe out their enemies to boost their wealth and influence. No, this plea for divine intervention comes from a people who have just crawled out of several generations of forced exile, praying and hoping for the day when they could return home - and now that they *have* returned home, are devastated by what they find. "Their then" as Marcus Borg would put it, was a place of ruin and despair. How, then, does that speak to "Our now"?

The way that the Bible, particularly the Hebrew Scriptures, deals with disappointment and despair, is one of the reasons it remains resonant and important for us in our day. Far from just being a rule-book or a collection of hero stories, the God we meet in the Bible hunkers down beside us in our bleakest times, as anger and longing and frustration all get spoken aloud to a living God. In the Psalms and the writings of the Prophets, there is no self-shushing because it's not polite to speak harshly to God. No, the people of Isaiah's day acknowledged the fullness of their circumstances and mourned long and loud. Following what we now identify as Kubler-Ross's classic stages of grief, they cycle through denial, anger, bargaining and depression before arriving at any sense of acceptance, and they do that directly with God because the intention of God is so real, and so clear to them. They understood God not as distant or as primarily concerned about who gets through an end-of-life portal to heaven, but as a living entity who was right there with them in their everyday struggles. They understood that "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" - and that the Holy entity who is found in the midst of that justice will not run away when the going gets tough.

So we have in these verses from Isaiah 64 a push and pull with a God who cared enough and was real enough and present enough to be wrestled with. The prophet shouts (v.1) , "Why don't

you tear the sky apart and come down? The mountains would...shake with fear.” The prophet (v.2) tries to make his enemies into God’s enemies, saying “Come and reveal your power to your enemies and make the nations tremble at your presence!” And the prophet even tries laying a guilt trip on God, pointedly saying (vv.3-4) “There was a time when you came and did terrifying things that we did not expect...no one has ever seen or heard of a God like you.”

How often we have found ourselves similarly wondering where God is, why the God of the ages seems distant. Crushed by grief, confused by unemployment or relationships or \$10 a barrel oil or opportunities that did not work out as we had hoped, worried at the ongoing nastiness of public discourse, or shattered by the suffering in the world, it makes sense that we would wonder about God. If God is “powerful” in any sense of the word, how could this be?

One possible answer, is one that Isaiah toys with (v.6): “because of our sins we are like leaves that wither and are blown away by the wind.” Maybe it’s our fault. Maybe the misfortunes of life are the just rewards of misbehavior. And while such logic might work, if all human life was just a game that God was playing, it actually just comes down to a form of “stinking thinking,” disempowering us with guilt rather than seeking a helpful way forward.

Working through his grief, Isaiah eventually comes around to a place of greater hope (v.8-9), “But you are our father, Lord. We are like clay, and you are like the potter...we are your people; be merciful to us.” Legitimately pressured by challenging circumstances, Isaiah had started to view God as far away or punitive, but then it comes to him: God is neither of these. God is as close to us, and as involved with us, as a potter sitting at her potting wheel, smoothing and shaping us. God is neither our boss nor our commander-in-chief, God is as involved in our lives as a parent with top-notch parenting skills. Like a lump of clay we, at times, need to let ourselves be molded by God’s loving intention; and like a child who learns more from skinned knees than from being bubble-wrapped, we can count on God as a wise and loving parent, not intervening but always loving, and loving us at a deep, cellular level, the one who birthed us and has the highest hopes for us. Our hope comes, not from a distant God bursting in, removing our personal agency and intervening, but from a God whose intention for love and justice lives in us and within our neighbour. Our hope comes, not from a bully God who will beat up our foes, but from a supportive, parental God who will not leave us when we are hurting, or when we have screwed up royally.

Reading Isaiah from a Jewish standpoint, that is a substantial amount of good news. The God who was close enough to be argued with, was not absent or distant or unconcerned. God was where God always is, binding wounds, mending broken hearts, weeping with the mourners, rebuilding the broken, finding reconciliation amidst injustice. The children of Israel knew they could count on the faithfulness of God in their glory days and in their times of humiliation, even as they lamented the times when that fidelity was hard to see. God’s long arc of loving intention toward justice was a given, everywhere and always.

As Christians preparing to hear the nativity story one more time, we hear Isaiah picking through a landscape that is both physically and spiritually challenging, wondering if God even cares; and we recall a time 600 years after Isaiah, when we believe God did do something decisive. In our Christian narrative, Jesus is the fullest personal expression of God’s intention for the world. And we take those other words from last week off the shelf, that proclaiming Jesus as Lord means something or someone else isn’t, and that says to us yet again that the power of greed and division and manufactured outrage that have such sway in today’s world is not of God’s choosing. We can get up in the morning and put one foot in front of the other, because our hope is founded in a God who participates in life: a holy presence who cares, who does get involved, who can identify with the tumble-down, rough-scrabble realities of human living.

This holy hope finds a home in relationship: in relationships of love and trust with one another, in our relationship with a God who is anything but dispassionate; and in our core-level relationship with God's principles of justice and inclusion and wholeness for all. That hope is available to all people who are willing to set aside lesser goals and lesser horizons and, I pray, is the foundation that our life as a congregation rests upon. As our Mission Statement says, we believe that God calls us to be people of spiritual growth, of invitation, of social justice, and all of that emanates from our trust in a loving God, whose love is our horizon line of hope.

We begin this year's Advent journey, this annual pilgrimage of preparation, by confronting the false lords of our day which pretend that self-centeredness and fear of neighbour will lead us to the life we yearn for, and say to them: no thank you, we choose hope founded in resilient, powerful love. We choose the hope God intends, hope that is our companion through all of life's peaks and valleys, a hope that grows as we work toward reconciliation and inclusion, a generous hope that inspires us to reach out with the very love of Christ Jesus. We acknowledge on this day the challenges of life, and the just, loving intention of God which orients us to Hope. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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