

“Getting Real” About Repentance

First Sunday in Advent - November 29, 2020
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed.

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Today begins Advent. Today begins the new Church year, with this season of John the Baptist crying out, *Prepare the way of the Lord!* Advent, along with Lent, is a season of repentance, and to be candid in the matter, repentance is not our favorite way to spend a season. We would rather see Advent as a glad countdown to Christmas, and besides that we aren't all that good at repentance. We hear the call to repent and we may put on a long, solemn face, but this accomplishes little. We may be very aware that our lives need to change, but all our resolutions and attempts to improve our ways are seldom successful. Repentance is not our most loved activity, and some have tried to downplay the role of repentance in this Church season. We once adorned the Church with purple in Advent, which is the color for repentance, but in recent times we have shifted to blue as a symbol of royalty. Blue may remind us of the coming King, but the coming of the King also calls us to prepare and to change our ways, in other words, to repent! We cannot escape this essential call of Advent. So here we are, beginning this season of repentance, knowing that we don't like to repent, we aren't

particularly good at it, and to be honest, feel clueless in this pursuit. Perhaps I have overstated the problem, but repentance is a matter in which we need more instruction, and so Isaiah's prophecy is a ray of light and wisdom. This particular passage may appear to be disjointed and difficult to interpret (as are so many of the prophet's writings), but here we find sage wisdom and guidance for those who truly desire to *prepare the way of the Lord*.

This instruction on repentance does not begin with a sad face, but with a joyous expression of longing. *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.* The prophet is calling out for the Lord to appear, and Paul would echo this sentiment a millennia later: *Maranatha!* (Aramaic, meaning "Come Lord") *Come Lord!* (1 Corinthians 16:22) Isaiah calls for God to come and to be among His people and the cry echoes a longing for Eden where God walked in harmony with His people. There is a desire for justice and peace, and a longing for God to deal with Israel's enemies. The prophet's cry should cause every believer to feel a renewed longing for God's presence and the rescue of this troubled world.

Such a petition to God is made with a fond memory of earlier times when God came to rescue, and every Hebrew would be quick to recall the Exodus from Egypt, the conquest of the Promised Land, and the mighty kingdoms of David and Solomon. *O that God would intervene again! You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.* As you helped us before, help us again! Israel had much to celebrate at they remembered their past, and so do we.

We are now in a season of glad anticipation. Yes, this quickly becomes a sentimental season where emotion can cloud our vision, but even beyond the sugar-coated memories, there is much to delight in as we think of Decembers past. We remember family gatherings, joyful worship and carols, holidays at home and peaceful moments. We remember God feeling so near and real in those special times of prayer and celebration. We may also remember earlier times in our lives when God brought us through hard times. We remember these times past, and we look ahead, longing for God to act again, and for Christ to appear. In this season we sing, *Come thou long expected Jesus*, and we mean every word of it!

Advent is a time for longing and anticipation of the coming King, and no, I have not forgotten about the call to repentance. Isaiah invites us to join him in calling upon God to come down to us, and from this joyous call he moves on to the next difficult step in this path toward repentance. Having looked heavenward, we are now to look in the mirror. At that moment of Isaiah's prophecy God and God's people were not on the

best of terms. *But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed.... for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.*: This is an amazing and frightening thing to hear of God hiding from us, but this not a matter of God being temperamental. This is a plain reference to God sending Israel into exile after centuries of warnings from earlier prophets. After countless acts of idolatry God finally exiled His people who refused to turn away from their false gods, but this exile was for a measured period of time, and God would return to them, and He did. The exile was a demonstration of just how disobedient God's people could be.

Even more unsettling than this was the continuing sorry state of the human heart and spirit! Hear the prophet's sad report. *We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you.* We are described as those who are unclean, and as those greatly overpowered by the forces of evil. A very dark picture is being presented of the human spirit. Though we all have a desire to love God, there are other selfish desires which seem to cling just as closely. This battle of good and evil, and the persistence of that evil within us, is artfully presented in a contemporary Christian song which may be familiar to some of you: *How Deep the Father's Love for Us.*

*How deep the Father's love for us,
how vast beyond all measure,
that He should give His only Son
to make a wretch His treasure.*

*How great the pain of searing loss
the Father turns His face away
as wounds which mar the Chosen One
bring many sons to glory.*

*Behold the man upon a cross,
my sin upon His shoulders.
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice,
call out among the scoffers.*

*It was my sin that held Him there
until it was accomplished.
His dying breath has brought me life.
I know that it is finished.*

*I will not boast in anything,
no gifts, no power, no wisdom,
but I will boast in Jesus Christ,
His death and resurrection.*

*Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer,
but this I know with all my heart.
His wounds have paid my ransom.*

—Stewart Townsend, © 1995 Thankyou Music

How beautifully this song captures the duplicity of the human spirit! We call Christ Lord and want to be obedient, yet we so easily find ourselves falling away, going along with the world and not standing up for our faith. *Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice, call out among the scoffers.* What shall we say, for this seems too sad to ponder?

Are we hopeless? I remember as a child deciding that I had better be good, because Santa was coming, but I just as well remember not being able to make myself act one bit better even though my great Christmas reward was at stake! As I have gone through life, I have often found myself equally helpless in improving my ways and we all know what happens to New Year's resolutions. From a human perspective, our situation is grim, for even when we try, we only prove that we are not very good at repenting. So, what shall we do?

We do the only thing that we can do. We plead for the mercy of God, and find that our pleas are not in vain! Isaiah's plea has two themes. First, he calls upon God, reminding God that He is our Father. *Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever.... Now consider, we are all your people.* What cry could be more heartfelt than a cry for one's mother or father? No matter how far we might have strayed, a mother or father will seek a way to bring back a wayward son or daughter. The psalmist delights in God with these words: *As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him, for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.*

The second theme of Isaiah's plea to God is aimed at God's role as our Creator and sustainer. *We are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.* The image of God the potter is used elsewhere in the Bible and is a favorite picture for many. My concern is that moderns may tend to romanticize this picture. Pottery is a popular art form for many of the avant-garde and some interpret this image of God as potter as an image of God gently shaping and guiding our lives. What Isaiah is saying is much more radical than that. We, God's people, are presented as humble clay, which is little greater than mud! Yet God takes us, lowly as we are, and shapes us into something wonderful and this is all God's shaping and doing. From clay, God makes a thing of beauty. From mud comes glory! God does wonderful work and we are the grateful recipients of those efforts! It is God who restores and remakes us. Real repentance is God centered. Yes, we are called to do our part, and there is a time for strategies and resolutions, but it is God who does the real work of transformation.

Isaiah calls us to Advent repentance, and this kind of repentance is best summarized in the fourth verse of the chapter. *From ages past no one has heard, no ear has*

*perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for **those who wait for him.***
We wait upon God! This is the heart and soul of it all, and not our weak attempts at self-improvement. It is Christ the Savior whom we await, who comes into our very lives to begin a powerful work of life and transformation. This is where real repentance begins. Let us look heavenward, humbly present ourselves to God, and await our rescue. There may be times for our resolutions and improvement plans, but it is God who does the heavy lifting. It is God who comes and rescues us. Our primary assignment in this season of repentance is to look toward heaven with a joyful hope and wait upon our sure salvation. This is Advent!