

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 for ever. Now consider, we are all your people. *

Oh God, where are you? How many times have we asked that question? Once? Monthly? Daily? As people of faith who believe there is such a thing as a genuine Living God, asking where God is in times of trouble is not just a natural question, it is a necessary question.

I expect more than a few of us have had to endure one of the worst nightmares of parenting: losing track of your child. Maybe it was at a store. Maybe a larger place like an amusement park. It happened to me at Disney World almost twenty years ago. That feeling of helplessness, even hopelessness. Eventually, we were reunited. I planted myself in a section of the park where I figured everyone had to pass through and waited, and waited, and waited. And finally my 12-year-old son showed up. Of course, he would never admit that he was scared, but he did seem a bit glad to see me, anyway. By the way, this was before I met Kelly.

I wonder when we find ourselves lost in life, that's how we react sometimes when God does get involved and fixes things — at least a little bit in our favor. We hate to admit we were worried, but we're glad things worked out just the same. Thanks, God, I guess. The question is, when problems are resolved, do we give God credit for being there or do we attribute it to just plain luck or our own personal skill, no God required — thank you.

Where is God? Today begins the season called Advent, a four-week countdown or perhaps count up, to the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. But before we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the coming of the Messiah or, as he is also called, Immanuel God-with-us, we should be asking the question, who cares? Better yet, why do we need a savior in the first place? I mean what is Christmas nowadays except a chance to spend lots of money on things we probably don't need and overeat and perhaps over drink and certainly overspend. The name of the day, Christmas, might as well be changed to "Winter Welcoming" or as the late Jerry Stiller's character Frank Costanza on "Seinfeld" called it, "Festivus."

The point of Christmas is to ostensibly welcome Jesus into the world. But why?

Our passage today from the Book of Isaiah shows the children of Israel as we so often find them: in trouble. Now, when we say trouble, it was a strange kind of trouble. This passage is taking place right after the prayers of the Israelites had been answered. After being held in captivity in Babylon for decades, they were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Finally they were coming home! Finally they were going to resume life as it was supposed to be. Finally, some getting back to normal.

However, there was one small problem: when they got back to Jerusalem, they found things had changed. The city itself was in ruins. The temple had been looted and heavily damaged. Over the

years, newcomers, foreigners had moved in. And, worst of all perhaps, the Israelites who remained were not particularly overjoyed to see their long-lost cousins from Babylon return!

In short, God answered the prayers of the Israelites in exile: God brought them home. But, in the case of all prayers God answers, things did not return exactly to the way they were. Instead, the Israelites had to contend with a new reality going forward and they didn't like it one little bit.

Speaking of altered expectations and changed realities, it appears that our prayers have been answered and a Covid vaccine that works is a reality. Never mind that it may take six months or more to inoculate all of us, at least there is light at the end of the tunnel.

But think a moment. Let's fast forward to June. Let's assume that we have crossed that threshold into "herd immunity" when enough of us by getting vaccinated can't get Covid and insuring few if any of the unvaccinated won't get it, either. Will the post-Covid world be the same as the pre-Covid world? Politically, of course there will be a new president dealing with trying to rebuild the nation on so many fronts. But think about all the other changes we have had to make in our lives over the past nine months. Will things, can things, ever be as they were? Will we live as we did, shop as we did, work as we did, go to school as we did? And so many other things? It is a fact that thousands of businesses have closed, where will the workers go? The chaos that is 2020 will give way to a "new normal" in 2021, a new normal which may prove to be equally chaotic or worse. Nobody knows.

The children of Israel discovered quickly that the world they thought they were returning to was not the same as the one they left and they were unhappy. They complained to God. They asked for signs and proof that God existed. They wanted their God to fix everything and just make all the problems go away and turn the past into the present.

Doesn't that sound familiar? A common complaint of human beings since forever has been a longing for the supposed "good old days" when everything was OK. Funny, though, how time and memory have a disturbing habit of selectively eliminating the bad times from our recollection, isn't it?

I mean, part of the debate of the past four years has been a kind of nostalgic longing for life in America as it was in the 1950s. It was a time when, as Archie Bunker could sing, "Guys like us (white males, in other words) we had it made." And of course, "Girls were girls and men were men." — whatever that means. Ah, the fifties. America was powerful, mostly because the world was rebuilding from World War II. The fifties, when everybody but white men were blatantly and legally discriminated against. The fifties, when segregation ruled, women could rise no higher than the level of secretaries, and we lived in fear that the Russians would wipe us out with an Atomic Bomb. Indeed, "Those were the days."

In short, friends, whether it was 2500 years ago, 70 years ago, or right now, human beings have this bizarre longing for the past, conveniently forgetting the problems and inventing a past that was all peaches and cream for everybody. Do we really want 2019 to come back, just as it was? Or 1955, or 600BC?

The point is, friends, is that life as we remember it, while it might have been great for us personally, was certainly not great for everyone. I expect there are some, maybe many here, who have little interest in revisiting the past.

At the same time, while we weren't thrilled about the past, we may not be excited about the present, either. And the future, well, hope for the best, but be prepared for the worst.

What's it going to take? I really wonder, what's it going to take? What's it going to take for us to realize that wishful thinking whether in the form of longing for the past or dreaming about the future is just that: wishes. And, as the Chinese curse goes, "May you get what you wish for," living an imaginary life rooted in wishes instead of reality will inevitably disappoint us.

I asked at the beginning of this sermon, why do we need a Savior? It's obvious, isn't it? We need a Savior to save us from ourselves.

Too many people, those who say they follow Christ and the many more who don't, think that Jesus is all about airy-fairy talk about heaven and the sweet bye-and-bye. Yes, Jesus does proclaim that life, our life, extends beyond the earthly reality we can perceive with our senses. Death is not the end. The grave is not the final answer.

And friends, if that was all Jesus was about, he would not be worth following. He is hardly the only one to talk about life beyond the grave.

No, Jesus is the Savior and Jesus is the one we should follow because he is very much about how to live life right now, in the present.

How to handle the uncertainty of life? How do we stop being constantly buffeted by the chaos that is what passes for normal in life? I mean, really, who in this world has lived a perfect and trouble free life from the day they were born to the present? Who has not experienced troubled times? Who has not endured illness or stood with a loved one who was suffered? Who doesn't know personally, intimately, about heartbreak, and sorrow, and loss?

The point of Christianity is that we assert that in Jesus, we have someone who has experienced first hand all the trouble, all the pain, all the suffering life has to offer. He understands the human condition perfectly well because he lived on earth as one of us.

And what was his response to the chaos of our humanity? Did he ignore it? No. Did he detach himself from it? No. Did he try to change it? Yes, but with limited success because it continues right now.

What Jesus does offer us is a way to look and live life that puts the chaos of life and living in perspective. Instead of meeting the craziness of life with complaint, as the Israelites did, or nostalgia, as the fifties-lovers do, or wariness, as we in 2020 do, Jesus meets the craziness of life with one response and one response only: Jesus defeats chaos with love.

How else, friends, can we describe our existence as but a time filled with rumors, fears, and threats. We have just seen how easily lies are proclaimed as truth. We have seen how easily such concepts as justice and equity are perverted and sold to the highest bidder. We have learned, at great cost, that the lifestyles we may be accustomed to do not automatically belong to everyone — especially those who look different from us.

However, can we not also assert that if love were the foundation of our lives, not rumor, not fear, not threats, not injustice, not inequality, not racism, not hatred, our lives and our world would be radically different?

What indeed would human existence look like if we could step back from the chaos that passes for normalcy in our lives and instead look at each other as God looks at us — all of us, every one of us as God's beloved children, created in the image of God, all of us equally loved and cherished?

This is who Jesus is: God in human form showing us a radically different way to live our lives. Now of course, Jesus is not the only human being to talk about unconditional love. Just pick up the Bible and read the Old Testament: love is proclaimed on every page, from the words of the prophets encouraging the people to the actions of God rescuing the people over and over again from themselves.

But Jesus came into the world to show us that love is just not a choice, it is the only choice.

Friends, is what is going on in our world in 2020 the way you want it to be tomorrow and next week and forever? Are you happy? Are you satisfied? Are you content? Well, perhaps in our own world you are, but if you look beyond your personal existence, can you truly be satisfied with the condition of this community, or our nation, or our world?

We need Jesus in our lives this day and every day because he demonstrated for us the only viable solution to our problems: Love God, and Love our neighbors as ourselves.

In our reading today, the people declared that they were the clay, God's clay. Clay to be shaped, formed, molded, and used as God wishes — not as we wish, but as God wishes.

The question for us on the first day of Advent is quite simple. Are you God's clay or not?

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.