

First Sunday of Advent (Year B, RCL)
Isaiah 64:1-9

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Hello. Welcome to Advent! Happy new church year! Well, unfortunately, or fortunately depending on how you take this, the shopping malls are filled with corny, saccharine Christmas music but the Church is at the other end of the spectrum. We are in the muck. The First Sunday of Advent is always marked by an annual reading of one of the three decidedly UN-cheerful “mini apocalypses” found in the Gospels. Our first Old Testament reading of Advent, year B is from Isaiah and also does not seem to correspond with the first door of my cheerful Advent calendar and the little chocolate within... Isaiah wails “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!” Isaiah saw wars, destruction, and the People of God turning away from the Covenant. Their enemies surrounded them and life was testing them. I think Isaiah had had enough of it and called for God to swoop in and FIX it. Isaiah said, “When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down; the mountains quaked at your presence.” In other words, “Do it again, for us now Lord, please!” But Isaiah must have wondered why God wasn’t acting as he had done for His people in Egypt with Moses. Why not intercede in the same way for his people in Judah in Isaiah’s time? *You did it for them, Lord, why not for us?* Isaiah seemed to conclude it may be because of their sin. *Did we do something wrong, Lord?* Of course they sinned, but were their sins SO bad that God hid himself? Or did God being absent cause them to fall way from worship and to seek idols, to cause them to suffer because he was not acting on their behalf anymore? The prophet Isaiah pointed out that even though the Lord led his people through the Red Sea and to freedom in the Promised Land, life pressed on and there were challenges. But what was it all about? *Why, Lord? Why?*

There is always this contrast in Advent: of the forced excitement over shopping and gifts, or the anticipation of celebrating the baby in the manger to come on Christmas, all so sweet, so lovely and the starkness of what’s really going on out there in the world. Didn’t anyone tell Islamic State or Putin it was time to come in and have some Starbuck’s peppermint mocha? Our children’s pageant will truly be sweet and funny and all that it should be, but *is that all there is* to Christmas and what our worship is about? No and no. People are still going to do what they do as they have done. There may be stories of hope which surprise us and the Christian message will be spread in unexpected places and in unexpected ways, all good. But yet, the world continues to suffer – there is no break.

We have Ferguson and UVA in the headlines reminding us that “We have all become like one who is unclean” from sin. Maybe this will be the year when God reaches down from heaven and takes care of business, like he did with Pharaoh’s chariots that one day. I think every generation since Exodus hits this point. *Lord, we need you to be like a colossal super hero and FIX it. Lord, we are in the muck and it only seems to be getting deeper. Surely it is time for God himself to act.* But that is not how it works. So our lectionary, ignoring the cheerful elves in the shops, raises this up before us so we can face it head on: we are in the muck.

Each advent we listen to the prophets, as the little ones will hear in children’s chapel today, the Godly Play lesson will tell them, “the prophets point the way, they show us the way to Bethlehem.” Isaiah, in the midst of feeling like the people of God were wallowing in mud, their sin making them unclean – could see the possibility that in God we are not mud but clay, with potential. The muck is NOT the final word. Isaiah said “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.” This is how Isaiah saw God working in the world, present in the forming that was happening among the people of God. The hope of Israel was that God kept his promises and would keep them. He would work this people, shape them according to his plan. For Isaiah’s theology, the hard times remind us of where we have put ourselves through communal sin – those sins which we all share through the way we behave as a people, and through our personal sins.

We have broken the covenantal relationship and our personal relationship with God. We push him away. But God, the Potter reaches in and continues to work us. We read Isaiah at this time of year because of the persistence of LIGHT in Isaiah. People of God, look up from the mud: A light is shining. Isaiah wrote, (Isaiah 9.2) “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.”

The candle we light this first Sunday honors the prophets, who kept calling the people of God to turn to Him, to trust that the Lord would keep his promises. What really intrigues me about the idea of God as a potter is that he is working with *us*. We are his people and God is fashioning us into what He desires us to be. Think of all of the delicate teacups and teapots you have ever seen, or vases, or pots – all the intricate details possible: think of the blues and celadon greens of Asia, blues and browns of English-style pottery, red and black geometric shapes of Africa and ancient Greece; the Polish and Czech stoneware with their delicate patterns. Each piece began as a humble lump of clay. A potter worked it and fashioned it into something unique and beautiful. In doing so, the potter got messy and the vessel took shape through pounding and turning and pressure and tool work. If the pot collapses on the wheel, the potter will sigh and begin again until the clay yields to the design and forms the piece the potter is planning for it. The colors start as pigments that change when the raw clay pots are set into the kiln. Something dull brown becomes vibrant red in the fire of the kiln. The glazing is an art all on its own, the alchemy of precision and timing. And it will be beautiful! Even if it is a five year old working on a pencil holder for his mum – it will be beautiful.

James Weldon Johnson in his poem, “The Creation” imagined God, the great potter, at his work:

<p>Up from the bed of the river God scooped the clay; And by the bank of the river He kneeled Him down; And there the great God Almighty 80 Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky, Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night, Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;</p>	<p>This Great God, Like a mammy bending over her baby, 85 Kneeled down in the dust Toiling over a lump of clay Till He shaped it in His own image; Then into it He blew the breath of life, And man became a living soul. 90 Amen. Amen.</p>
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[From *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Penguin, 1990), p.20.]

God is working on us all of the time to shape us. Sometimes we feel it more than others – as Isaiah did in his time, this pushing and forming and the pressure of the weight of life upon us. Sometimes it may feel like we are spinning on the potter’s wheel when life gets to be confusing or so hard. We are shocked by its heat as the pigments of life that are painted onto us transform into brilliant colors and bold patterns etched into us in crazy patterns become meaningful in relief. As life puts its force upon us, what we need to always hear in the prophetic voice is that we are the work of God’s hand because we are His people and because he loves us as a Father, or as Weldon Johnson wrote, “Like a mammy bending over her baby.” What he is working in each of us will be beautiful and unique in its infinite variety –because God is shaping us each into his own Image.

The prophet Isaiah calls to us this first Sunday of Advent, to turn to God, to trust that His will for us is not about our sins, but about our potential as His own people, made in His own image. The call of the prophet Isaiah is setting us on the journey to Bethlehem, to a lowly manger, where the Potter formed something new: He came down to join us in the mud and formed himself into man. Let that generous and humble act of the Potter shape you and mold you anew this Advent.

Amen.