

Mercy and Help

Isaiah 64:1-9

If you are like me, your prayers are about thanksgiving and praise and a few requests for help sprinkled in. However our scripture today is about asking God the hard questions, and not stopping until you have things off your chest! Isaiah asked about the way God had chosen to relate to the world. Why was God refusing to act powerfully and dramatically to rescue Israel from their distress.

The frustration expressed in the opening verses of chapter 64 reflects Isaiah's struggle to reconcile the ancient stories of God's powerful presence with his experience of God's absence.

Who has not at one time or another wondered the same thing? If in biblical times God intervened in history with "awesome deeds" ([64:3](#)), why does God not do so today? Surely there are egregious wrongs that deserve to be righted. Why would God deliver Israel from Egypt but not deliver six million Jews from Hitler's death camps? We read stories about God's spectacular interventions, yet we look in vain for such visible signs of God's involvement in the world today. We want the mountains to quake and the nations to tremble at God's presence. Instead, the sufferings of our day are too often met with divine silence.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a German concentration camp in 1944, dared to draw the logical conclusion, "God would have us know that we must live as men *and women* who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us ([Mark 15.34](#)). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the

world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us."

God's refusal to replicate a Red Sea-type deliverance does not mean that God has abandoned Israel or the church. Our hope does not rely on God's acting today in the same ways God acted in the ancient stories, but it does rely on God's being the same God yesterday, today, and tomorrow—a God who hears our cries, a God who does not abandon us, a God who will finally redeem all that is lost in a new heaven and new earth (Isa. 65:17). The records do not dismiss the present in despair; rather, it draws on the collective memories of God's people as a source of hope for the future. **Scott Bader-Saye**

This Advent we begin with a prayer of the prophet Isaiah that is both a lament and a plea. The heavens will open and the God of Sinai will come down with righteous power to stun the enemies of Israel with his presence, bringing shock and awe to his adversaries. Even though the people of God had sinned and felt God had hidden God's face from them, they still trusted God in their spiritual exile. In spite of all, they knew that they were clay and the works of the hand of the Almighty Potter.

Although the details of Israel's situation differ from those of our nation, there is a deep similarity between our existential conditions. We know that our reliance upon our own massive, ruthless political power, rather than the pursuit of justice, has brought us into political disrepute among nations. Our national prayer is a kind of sacrilegious prayer of the prophets; we would depend upon military power alone to make the mountains quake and the nations tremble. Isaiah was not a proponent of a sentimental spirituality of easy grace. He showed us a God who is angry and silent, one who hid God's face from a people who reject God's righteous ways. For us, the path leading from repentance to redemption involves an appeal to a more universal God than was called upon by Israel. Our task and the healing of the

nations depend upon our remembering that we are all the people of this awesome God: Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

Yes, this feels like a strange way to begin this time of Advent. Beginning Advent with weeping and a lament? That is unusual! And powerful. This is where we need to begin. The coming of Advent jolts the church out of Ordinary Time with the invasive news that it's time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness. Peace, the peace of shalom/salaam, is at the heart of the promise born at Advent, but it is difficult to arrive there safely and without becoming vulnerable along the way. It is difficult to set out on the journey without repentance and forgiveness. We can feel the tears glistening on our cheeks as we gaze upon Baghdad and Jerusalem, Darfur and Beirut, Tehran and Seoul. We are living in a time of broken-heartedness, a time when most Americans know that we must find ways to make peace in Iraq, but we feel helpless, hopeless, and just plain brokenhearted over the devastation in the Middle East.

There is a comment that our country has changed over the past years from one that wanted to be good to one that wants to feel good. We see some of this desire every Christmas season as people run from store to store and shopping mall to shopping mall, searching for the things that will bring them and their families some sort of fulfillment and happiness. Peace, the kind of peace that the world is hungering for, will not come from trying to fill ourselves up with material things. We try to stem our hurt and pride by running away from pain and caring only about what is ours. But we cannot create peace through selfishness, but by opening ourselves to hope. Hope is what is left when your worst fears have been realized and you are no longer optimistic about the future. Hope is what comes with a broken heart willing to be mended.

"No eye has seen any God besides you," Isaiah pleaded, "who works for those who wait" for the forces of hate and evil to be overthrown, the people to be

restored, and the house of David to be revived. A righteous branch will emerge to execute justice, hope, and possibility for God's people. Hold on to the promises of God, encouraged the prophet, even though the circumstances are bleak and seem nearly impossible. We pray for the hope of Advent: that God will break into the ordinary, bringing the promise of mercy, help, peace, hope, and restored life.

At Advent, God's people summon the courage and the spiritual strength to remember that the holy breaks into the daily. In tiny ways, we can open our broken hearts to the healing grace of God, who opens the way to peace. May that peace come upon us as a healing balm, as a mighty winter river, gushing and rushing through the valleys of our prideful fear and our own self-righteous indignation. This is not a season for passive waiting and watching. It is a season of wailing and weeping, of opening up our lives and our souls with active anticipation and renewed hope. At this time we can ask God's mercy and help and forgiveness, as we pray and weep for our broken world and then get up and continue the hope of God, made fresh and new again.

Patricia De Jong tells a story of last December, at the end of a beautiful Advent retreat, all who were there climbed up a hill to a small chapel at a place called Sky Farm. The chapel was dark and quiet and smelled of incense and old wood. They sang, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Each one of them was given a bright candle to carry in the darkened world, in order that they might burn brightly with the hope of the prophets and the courage of the gospel. The holy broke into the ordinary, flooding them with hope for peace and making their hearts strong again, so that they could move into the world with courage and compassion.

And so we do not lose heart; rather, we live with our hearts broken open so that compassion, caring, and God's reckless love can find a way into our hearts and the heart of the world. **Patricia E. De Jong**

We remember that God is father and he gives us his mercy and help. God is the potter who molds us into the people of God. God, our father and maker, is full of mercy and compassion! God forms and shapes us into God's people as a father over time shapes the character of his children, as a potter lovingly molds her clay. Isaiah calls on Israel to be malleable in the hands of God, and he reminds God to fulfill the task of forming Israel into a people of blessing.

In the season of Advent, Christians imaginatively enter a time of waiting for the Christ child, who comes as God hidden in human form, who comes not to inaugurate an apocalyptic cleansing but to reveal the power of the powerless in his self-giving on the cross. In so doing, he reveals the will of the Father who is eternally, patiently molding and shaping the clay of creation into the New Jerusalem. We are not only people who receive mercy and help, but also share it with those we meet. **Scott Bader-Saye**

Thanks be unto God for God's mercy and help, as we wait for Jesus' return!

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