

LAMENT AND REPENT

Isaiah 64:1-9

Advent Sunday I, Nov. 30, 2014

This past Wednesday a young father and young mother were driving their young children down Interstate 35 from Duluth, Minnesota to Des Moines, Iowa. They were driving to their father's parents' house (their paternal grandparents) so that they might celebrate Thanksgiving. According to this young father, all of a sudden, what looked like a car full of teenagers—passed them on the right hand side of his car; going what must have been close to 90 miles per hour. Yet what made this experience all the more frightening is that this car full of teenagers was not passing this young family's car on the right side using the right lane of the two-lane Interstate. No, they passed them on the right side using the shoulder of the highway!

That's when this young man said out loud, **"Where is the state trooper when you really need one?"** And we've have probably all had experiences somewhat similar haven't we? **Somebody goes sailing around us at an extremely high rate of speed, cutting into lanes and cutting out of lanes of traffic, almost taking your left rear fender, or your left front fender with them, and our deepest hope at that time is that there is a state trooper hiding out in the woods just off the Interstate a few miles ahead, who will pull them over and issue to them a well-earned citation.**

This young man's cry was for justice in those moments was not because of what had happened, but because of what so easily could have happened and what could still quite easily happen down the road! Oh that the state trooper would turn on his blue flashing lights, put the pedal to the metal, and pull that car over. That didn't happen, but fortunately that car full of teenagers must have made it to their **destination safely, because no accidents were reported revolving them!**

Well, I am hoping that this little story can help us to make a needed connection with the Old Testament lesson today. For the prophet in our Old Testament lesson is crying out for justice too, not just for a state trooper to appear on the scene, but for the LORD God Almighty to appear on the scene. The prophet wants NONE OTHER than the LORD God Almighty to show up. The prophet wants God to throw down a few lightning bolts from heaven to make his divine **POWER** and his divine **PRESENCE UNMISTAKENLY KNOWN AMONG THE RETURNING EXILES FROM BABYLON TO JUDAH.** The prophet want's God to display his power for the sake of all these peoples' enemies too.

Listen to how Isaiah begins his prayer: ***"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down; that the mountains might quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil. To make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!"***

These verses of our Old Testament lesson today are part of a larger section of Isaiah that extends back to Isaiah 63:7 all the way forward to Isaiah 64:12; that begins with a loud praise for all God's act of mighty deliverance throughout Israel's history, that's known as a lamentation.

But as is the often repeated history of the people of Israel revealed throughout the Old Testament, God's "children" (63:8) rebel, however, prompting God to become their perceived "enemy" (63:10) so that the people then pray to God for his forgiveness, his tenderness and mercy!

Sometimes when parents are doing their best job as parents when their children are still quite young, recently out of diapers, and just learning how to string words together in a way that can communicate some of their deepest thoughts and feelings to their parents; a child who is being disciplined may call out to a parent, especially its mother: **"I hate you and you are the meanest mommy in the whole wide world!"**

Still that child knows internally that she does not hate her mother, and still that child knows deeply inside of herself from her whole experience of life thus far that her mother loves her and cares for her more personally and powerfully than any other human being on earth, but still in her anger she feels a need to lash out at her mother. So this is how the people of Israel like out their lives at times in relationship to their great God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Just who is this community? This depressing prayer or "lamentation" is arising, most theologians believe, **from the exiles upon returning to Jerusalem and Judah, following the decree of King Cyrus in 537 BC, who as the King of Persia captured the Babylonians, and secured the release of the Hebrew people to return back home.** But upon returning, then there were threats, divisions, battles over land and power struggles that erupted between and among the returnees, those who had remained in the land and never were deported as many of their ancestors were, and those who had settled in other places after Jerusalem was conquered in 587 BC.

The prophet believes that if God would storm down a few lightning bolts from heaven, with a little thunder to follow; after which the Lord God would make his presence and his power unmistakable the way that he did 500 years before this in the Exodus event, after which in addition to those 10 plagues, God miraculously opened the Red Sea for his people to pass through on dry ground, though the Pharaoh's horsemen and chariots were drown in the sea, perhaps all of his spiritually complacent people themselves would begin to stand up and take notice. Too bad God wouldn't hover over his people returning as exiles from Babylon in their own day in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of cloud by night; but nothing like that seemed to be happening among the Jewish people returning from 70 years in exile at all!

As we begin to celebrate the season of Christmas anew, there are times also that we wish God would send down a few lightning bolts from heaven to clear up the many problems in the world all around us too, don't we? Unfortunately, there is still a lot of great turmoil in **Ferguson, Missouri**, right outside the city of St. Louis; there was rioting and looting, and a senseless burning of peoples' place of business, because of a public reaction to the decision of the **Grand Jury** there not to indict Officer Darren Wilson in the death of a young, unarmed, teenage boy named Michael Brown.

The terrorists group known as ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) continues to wreak havoc throughout those Middle Eastern countries, where it was believed through US Intervention, and the loss of American soldiers to death, while others were wounded, to have established law and order—though that law and order was short lived.

In verse five the prophet asks, **"Shall we be saved?"** If you were in his situation wouldn't you pray for all those unbelievers to see an example of the Almighty's Power? Wouldn't you like to see such people humbled so that as a result of God's will, they would be moved to believe and repent? And in our day, **WHAT COULD HAPPEN** to the mindset of all the people that reject Jesus Christ if God once more manifested His Holy Presence in the form of a huge pillar of fire?

When Isaiah said, **"As fire kindles the brushwood, as fire causes water to boil"** he was conveying the truth that just as the presence of fire would cause the underbrush in the woods to ignite immediately and water to boil, **so too will the presence of Almighty God cause an instantaneous effect. That's what Isaiah wanted. I dare say you might have also prayed that God would just show His hand to the world right now, because in truth this world needs an instantaneous display of God's Power.**

What Isaiah really wanted was for his people to once again call upon God's name after being reminded that God indeed was with them. The situation was such that many people were beginning to lose their faith in God altogether. Isaiah says: **"There is now no one who calls on your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities" (Isaiah 64:7)**

In other words, Isaiah is confessing the fact that his own people are pretty well lost! So why doesn't God do something? Why doesn't He just come on down, say a few words, part the ocean and leave it at that? Why doesn't God prove to this world in a physical way that he does exist, and that Jesus is our Lord and Savior and that there is a heaven and a hell and sin does kill eternally? After all God has done it before! So why won't He do it again?

I think the fact that God HAS done it before is the reason why He won't do it again. God could come down here and do some major things to get the world's attention but it really would be a redundant effort. Our Lord has given us everything we need to own faith in Him. God has already come down to this world in human form, lived among us and took upon Himself the sin of the entire world. If the only way people will believe in God's presence is by demanding God to perform a few more miracles for proof, then their foundation will be anything but one of faith.

Didn't even our Lord Jesus Christ say something very similar to this—as his own words are recorded for us in Matthew 12? There we read in verse 38 and following: **"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Jesus, saying, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.'" ³⁹But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. ⁴²The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:38-42)**

But whatever our lives have been up to this point, the prophet here wants us to know that it is never too late for us in this life for us to begin our lives all over again! You heard the prophet speak to God in our presence this morning: **"But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people!" (Isaiah 64:8-9)**

And yet, isn't this also something that we are forced to do as we grow older and mature. Some students cry when they graduate from high school, because they are so in love with life as they have known these past four years that they are not ready for it to change! But change it must! Or when you graduate from college, or get your first job—were you ready for all of those changes when it seems they were actually being thrust upon you? Were you ready when your first child was born? Were you ready when your youngest child went off for college? Did that sadden you or fill you with great joy? Do you worry about retiring from a profession you've given your whole life to for so long? How will you handle it, when your faithful spouse of some 40 or 50 years, suddenly precedes you in death?

So many unexpected things may happen to us in this life! Though we are all a sinful lot, God proved His Love for us by sending Jesus to personally atone for our sins thereby we have evidence of God's love in the Word of God. God has given us the ability to communicate with Him. We continue to see answers to our prayers as God feeds us, clothes us, heals us, and teaches us how to live for Him. These are some of the miracles our Lord has given to us, miracles which are seen also all throughout the pages of the Bible.

The Walgreens across the street from our church has steadily been building its Christmas stock ever since November 1st, when what had been the Halloween aisle was suddenly and majestically converted overnight into what soon became the makings of a Christmas extravaganza.

The other day when I was in Walgreens, I noticed that there are even now some reindeer Band-Aids in the pharmacy section of our neighboring store and now that Black Friday has come and past, it's growing more and more impossible to escape the kind of scurry and scramble behavior I've witnessed at Walgreens, in Kroger and Publix, at the mall and also in Department Stores everywhere. There is a real sense of hopeful anticipation and preparation for Christmas alive in the air in the secular world, but it doesn't quite match up with the kind of hopeful anticipation and preparation that we Christians are called up by the church to associate with the season of Advent.

The season of Advent is a season of waiting. The season of Advent is also one of hopeful anticipation. But the prophet Isaiah insists that if we are going to be honest about our enemies and all the trouble they have caused us in this life, we should also endeavor to become more honest about ourselves! We too, have sinned, and provoked God's anger. "We have become like those over whom you have never ruled," Isaiah confesses. "We have become the enemies of God!"

But you know why we have great cause to be hopeful this Advent Season! Perhaps St. Paul expresses it best in Romans 5 when he writes: **"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in this that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are**

reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (Romans 5:6-11)! Amen