



## Advent 1

Year B

**November 27, 2011**

Isaiah 64:1-9

### **A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham**

We begin today a new church year – as we do every year at this time, on the first Sunday of Advent. It is a time of hope, of expectation, of preparation. So, while everyone else seems to have immersed themselves in the premature celebration of Christmas, the church says, “Wait. Hold on a minute. Can we wait to celebrate the birth of Christ until his actual birthday? Is this event not so profound that even in just remembering it, we need first to step back and pause for a few weeks to reflect on the significance of the Nativity, the birth of Christ, to recall a world before Christ, and attempt to appreciate the longing and yearning of generations thousands of years ago who prayed for God’s renewed presence in the world.

Did we pay attention to the reading from Isaiah this morning? It is a powerful lament by a people aching for God to be present to them. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”<sup>1</sup> This portion of the prophecy of Isaiah likely was written at the time that the exiled people of Israel, who had been carted off to Babylon in 597, were returning home, to Judah and Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> They viewed their exile as punishment from God for their turning away from God. And they saw their liberation and return as the work of God’s hand, as well. But even in 538, they have returned and still are confronting great difficulty. Imagine the dynamic between the upper echelon of Judean society that was returning to their homeland from exile and the remainder of society, the worker bees, so to speak who had been spared exile precisely because they were needed to keep the economy moving under their Chaldean oppressors. The reintegration of the exiled community was not going so well, and the people again were seeking divine intervention to save them and improve their lot.

So they call on God, reminding God, “you did awesome deeds that we did not expect... no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.”<sup>3</sup>

As these verses acknowledge, this is the God who has liberated the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt – often in dramatic fashion – and more recently has led the Persian King Cyrus the Great to allow and facilitate the return of

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 64:1(NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> “Exile,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Exile.html> (accessed November 23, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 64:3 (NRSV).

the exiles from Babylon. This is the God who will come to their aid: You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways."<sup>4</sup>

But they acknowledge their sinfulness, too. "But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed ..... 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."<sup>5</sup>

Now did you hear something that sounded like they were blaming God for their sinfulness? Sure sounded that way to me: "[B]ecause you hid yourself we transgressed."<sup>6</sup> But scholars note uncertainty with the translation from the original Hebrew.

Translating from Hebrew, incidentally, is particularly challenging because written Hebrew uses no vowels or spaces or punctuation. So translators must supply the vowels and spaces and punctuation in a way that forms words that seem to make most sense. Indeed, another respected translation states this last line of verse five as, "How can we be saved."<sup>7</sup> And the Jewish Study Bible, a worthy source when seeking to understand the Hebrew Bible, gives both translations and an explanation that to me makes more sense than just saying we have a translation problem here or we just need to look at this line in its larger literary context.

What this prayer of lament and petition seeks is God's intervention. Not next year. Not next month. Not next week. Not tomorrow. But today. Right now. And the longer you wait, God, the worse our situation will become, and the more we will sin. And this makes some sense in very practical terms. Sin leads to punishment. Punishment leads to disbelief. Disbelief leads to more sin. It's a cycle of iniquity that can be stopped only by God's intervention. And the sooner God intervenes, the sooner they would have a good reason to stop sinning, and the sooner they would again come to recognize God's authority.<sup>8</sup> So this verse that might be seen as placing responsibility for sin back on God would, let me suggest, be better understood as hyperbole intended to underscore the urgency of the plea for God to step in again.

And the reality is, when we turn away from God, God is essentially hidden. And, God does no more than "[Deliver] us into the hand of our own iniquity."<sup>9</sup> In short, we suffer the natural consequences of turning our backs on God.

But then, having buttered God up a bit by reciting God's powerful intervention in their history, having acknowledged their sinfulness, and bewailed God's consequent absence, the people of Israel play their trump card. Hey, God, you made us:

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 64:5 (NRSV).

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 64:7 (NRSV).

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 64:5 (NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 64:5 (NIV).

<sup>8</sup> Jewish Publication Society, *The Jewish Study Bible*, TANAKH Translation, ed. Adele Berlin and March Zvi Brettler, New York: Oxford University Press (2004) 910.

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 64:6 (NRSV).

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.<sup>10</sup>

As the wickedly alluring Jessica Rabbit said in the 1988 animated feature film, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, "I'm not bad. I'm just drawn that way."<sup>11</sup> In short, God, you made us this way, so you better step in and save us...again.

Now that was 2500 years ago. But are the times we live in or the lives we lead so different? Are we not very much in exile? No, we have not been carted off to a strange land, where our way of life and very identity as a people is imperiled. Yet, as followers Christ in 21<sup>st</sup> century North America, the land and culture around have changed. And our Christian way of life and identity are increasingly insular and constantly under threat. Right here where we have staked our claims and lived our lives, we are becoming the aliens – no less than if we had been exiled to some modern day Babylon, which incidentally, would be somewhere just south of Baghdad. Nearly 90 per cent of our fellow Canadians will not attend church today. We have become in the words of one prominent Christian theologian and author, "resident aliens" in our own land.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, do we not live in a time and place where, "There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you."<sup>13</sup>

Because our lives look frighteningly similar to lives of the exiled Judeans, we need to embrace the lament of Isaiah. We need to praise God, acknowledge our sinfulness – as we did in the Great Litany this morning –, and beg God's renewed presence in our lives and our culture. Praying as Isaiah did, not just as an individual, but as a people, a church, remembering that we are all the work of God's hand.

Might we take this time of hope and expectation in Advent to examine our lives as individuals and as a people, a people of Christ, to confess and repent those things that cause God to be hidden in our lives – the distractions and the addictions, and our own carefully nurtured inattention, resistance, or outright idolatry. Might we not consider the areas of our lives where God's presence may not be so apparent and how we might open doors to our hearts and minds and bodies and souls that have been pushed to or even shut tight against God's entrance by distraction, inattention, resistance, or idolatry? Where we have let God remain hidden in our lives?

The distinctions between us as followers of Christ and the consumer culture that surrounds and bombards us are particularly stark as Christmas

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 64:8-9 (NRSV)

<sup>11</sup> *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096438/quotes> (accessed November 22, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, Nashville: Abingdon Press (1989).

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 64:7 (NRSV).

approaches. It is so easy now to be distracted and beguiled by the gifts and the glitter. It is so easy to neglect who we really are as God's children and the work of God's hands, that we are drawn in God's image and called to be imitators of Christ. That we are not just ever unsatiated consumers seeking and hoping for just the right gift to give or, better yet, receive. It is so easy to idolize the temporal aspects of our Christmas celebration – the lights, the trees, the parties and presents – and pay only token attention to what we do in observance of Advent and to our appreciation of the true significance of Christmas.

Now I am not saying not to do this or that. Not to put up your tree until Christmas Eve; not to forego family gift giving; not to have a party or attend other pre-Christmas celebrations; not to have that turkey or roast beast. But if a tree, why not a crèche in your home, too? If a gift, why not, too, a gift to someone who expects no gift? If a party, why not a prayer, too? If a turkey, why not turkey sandwiches for the homeless, too? And if presents, why not the renewed presence of God in our lives.

Let us at least keep who we are visible. Let us pray with the confidence and certainty that God answered the prayer of Isaiah and came into the world to walk and to talk, to heal and to teach, to redeem and to reconcile. Let us in this season of Advent recall and rekindle our own hopes and expectations as we prepare and look forward to celebrating the birth of Christ.

And let us call upon God, as did the people of Israel in Isaiah, to be present to us and to the world. Let us ask God to be visible and not to be hidden, from us or from those who still don't even look for God. Again, in the words of Isaiah: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."<sup>14</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 64:1 (NRSV).