

Creator of the world, you are the potter, we are the clay, and you form us in your image. Speak to us now in the hearing of your word. Shape our spirits by Christ's transforming power, that as one people we may live out your compassion and justice, whole and sound in the realm of your peace. Amen

I love the prophets. Not that they have certain visions about the future like a fortune-teller, but that they are so honest. I am hungry for truth telling and honesty these days when it is hard to dig out from all the noise and hear the truth. In our passage, God's people were living in uncertain times. They returned from exile only to find their city Jerusalem in tatters and ruins. They knew what we sometimes try to deny, that they needed God's help and only God could save them from this mess. We certainly need God's help as well. We place our hope in Jesus the Messiah and Lord who has come and who is to return. This is what we remember this first Sunday in Advent.

Isaiah 64:1-9

64:1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--

64:2 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!

64:3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

64:4 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.

64:5 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.

64:6 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.

64:7 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.

64:8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

64:9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Communion Meditation

Author Anne Lamott writes in her little volume about prayer. She states that there are 3 essential prayers: Help, Thanks, Wow. ⁱ Today we read in Isaiah a sure cry for capital H-E-L-P! Help us, Jesus.

As we don the purple of Advent and begin a journey toward Bethlehem, we find ourselves in the muck of the ruins of Jerusalem with God's people who have just gotten home from an exile. I imagine

Jerusalem looking like a scene from a dystopian movie or even the modern day towns in Syria after ISIS is removed. This is not the homecoming they imagined when they daydreamed about their return. They cry to God- Help!

Perhaps you can relate. I had a conversation with a dear friend the other day who after walking into a room where the TV news was on, said, "I am so sick of hearing about sexual misconduct, our destruction of the environment, and taunts and jabs that can start a nuclear war. I am starting to feel hopeless, and I am a hopeful person. Am I losing my mind?" This friend decided to pour a drink and take a hot bath!

Are we all not dealing with stress of daily life? For some the holidays can be a time of anxiety, sadness, and grief. Many are in need of HOPE- the poor and the poor in spirit.

Then we might know how God's people felt.

We read in Third Isaiah 56-66 of God's people returning from Exile. They remember the promises that mountains would be made low, and a way be made. But they get there, and it is not all rainbows and butterflies.

They are praying. "Get down here, God. Just like you did at Sinai with Moses when all the people witnessed you on your holy mountain. Break into our world. Make it all right. Help!

And by the way, God, could you just smite those Babylonians while you are at it? They caused all of this trouble, hauling us off, and making a mess of things! Show them who's in charge, God!"

Then the prophet speaks God's word to them. There is the "Aha" moment. They admit. "uh oh, we ourselves are at fault." We have forgotten to call on you (vs. 7). We have forgotten the promise to Abraham and Sarah that we are blessed to be a blessing to the whole world. In our own disorder and chaos, we have forgotten our calling. Reading this passage in context of what was happening, we learn that God's people had been fighting and bickering ever since they got back to Jerusalem. We read in Isaiah 56- 58 that they have been mistreating the Eunuchs and the foreigners as less than, as outcasts. And they are living with the consequences of these sins. They have been unfaithful as a community of God's people- having hurt some members and treated them as less than rather than God's children. They have forgotten God from whom our help comes.

Help! They want God to smite the enemy, and then they realize, "Aha, the enemy is us. Our hands are dirty. We are unclean. We have made a mess of things."

64:7 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.

In other words, we made our bed. God is letting us lie in it. Help!

And for some life is a mess, too. Author Anne Lamott discusses the messiness of life as a recovering alcoholic who comes to faith in middle age. She grew up in a house with atheist intellectual parents suspect of prayer. She admits that her parents worshipped at the church of the *New York Times*, and they bowed before the antique hi-fi stereo cabinet, which held the Ark of the Covenant- Mile Davis and Thelonious Monk albums. Once while the babysitter Carol was there, Anne confessed to her brother that she wanted baby Jesus to come into her heart. He was distraught knowing their parents would not approve.

She said, "We have to pray before they come home."ⁱⁱ She is aware of her baggage, and confesses that she is utterly dependent on God's grace daily for her life and breath. Alcoholics Anonymous and a little Presbyterian Church has been her faith community. When she needs help, she has created a literal God Box that exists in time and space, an actual box or her glove box sometimes. She writes,

On a note, I write down the name of the person about whom I am so distressed or angry, or describe the situation that is killing me, with which I am so toxically, crazily obsessed, and I fold the note up, stick it in the box and close it. You might have a brief moment of prayer, and it might come out sounding like this: "Here, You think you're so big? Fine. You deal with it. Although I have a few excellent ideas on how best to proceed. Then I agree to keep my sticky mitts off..."ⁱⁱⁱ

Anne and God speak honestly with one another. This is how she prays. She reflects that when we think we can do it ourselves- fix, save, buy, or find a nice solution- it's hopeless. We're going to screw things up...so we summon a child's courage and faith, write it on a piece of paper, handing it to God, not knowing how it will turn out. But trusting that person, that situation into God's hands. Maybe we let out a deep breath, and begin to breathe again with the Holy Spirit's breath. We learn to surrender and trust God.

When chaos or disruption comes- a move, a terminal illness, a job loss, or being displaced by a broken marriage. Or for so many the destruction of natural disasters of earthquake, wildfires, and hurricanes hits. I think of Puerto Rico-where 4 million without electricity and 2 million without clean water still. We have seen so much almost apocalyptic destruction and chaos. We have to give it to God in prayer, and we also must examine ourselves for our part in the situation like God's people did. Admit our sin, our complicity. We cast ourselves on the abundant mercy of God . Help!!

So where do we find hope? Not the verb Hope, but the noun HOPE. The way we use the word hope, we use it as a verb, but it can sometimes just be replaced by wishing. "I am hoping to come visit soon" or "I hope that you feel better soon." We need the noun HOPE. We need something sure and real. Not just hoping and wishing and praying...

Where do we find hope? in the knowledge that God came down to earth in Jesus. And God continues descend and move among us through the Holy Spirit. In this season when we celebrate that Messiah has come, we also look forward to Jesus' coming again. We are watching and actively waiting. Waiting

by practicing our faith, that hope and allowing the Love of God to fill us, and then go out and share it. Hope is the Messiah who shows us who God is and the ways we are called to respond to God's love. Hope is a gift from God.

We read in 1 Corinthians 1:9, *God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

We sang, "Great is Thy Faithfulness...morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed, thy hand hath provided." Sometimes we get so focused on our faithful response, that we forget the amazing faithfulness of God. The people cry out for God to come down. And God did in Jesus the Christ child.

Again, we hear this promise in Isaiah 64:8 *Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.*

When we are in the hands of the Potter, God will remake us into what God desires. God will create-then recreate-and make something of us that is useful to God and beautiful in God's hands. We, his people, are common as dirt, clay in the potter's hands. But in God's hands we will be remade again into what God desires.

I asked a local potter and member of our church family, Nancy Spitler, to reflect on this passage and share any insights.

She shared that working with clay is dirty work. It gets everything dirty- rags, tools, floor, the potter's wheel. Nancy wrote, "But when it's fired, then glazed and fired again, it becomes usable... and cleanable (if that's a word!). We generally think of fire as destructive, but for clay it's what turns it into stone, and art, and something usable and functional. Everything else burns off."

In God's hands, we confess our brokenness and sin, and surrender. We pray, "Help! God we need you to help us! We know our hands are dirty, and we have made some of this mess, so could you tear open our hearts, come down here, and work a miracle in us?"

Nancy wrote,

I remember going to a pottery demonstration years ago when we lived in Macon. One of the potters there was W.A. Gordy from Cartersville, Ga. He started with a ball of clay and made a bowl. Then he would collapse it down and pull it up into a cylinder, collapse it down and throw a plate. Someone (another potter) standing behind me said, "You just can't do that." Because none of the rest of us could, and 99.8% of other potters couldn't do that. But he was about 70 at the time, and had been digging his own clay, and making his own glazes, and throwing pottery all of his life. And in his hands, that clay could be anything at all.

Gordy was a truly capable Potter.

We are all clay that will be remade over and over, by the loving, capable hands of God. Sometimes that can be painful- being worked over, dirt everywhere, re-formed. Nancy shared that she sometimes uses different kinds of clays swirled together to make something new and even more beautiful when shaped together into a bowl, our different gifts combining to become something new that we cannot be alone. God makes us into a new community- his Body on earth.

Advent is a time to reflect, actively wait, and allow the Holy Spirit to remake us again into the image of God. God came to us to show us God's love and how to live. With that hope, we can surrender into the able and faithful hands of the experienced, loving Potter, who renews us for life and service to our Lord Jesus.

God is faithful to those whom he calls into the Fellowship of the Son, Jesus, the Messiah, our Lord.

That is a HOPE we can trust and believe. Amen.

ⁱ Lamott, Anne, *Help, Thanks, Wow; The Three Essential Prayers*, (New York: Riverhead, 2012)

ⁱⁱ Lamott, 18-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lamott, 36.