

## Waiting and Longing

## Isaiah 64:1-9

Today I would like to add another reading for our consideration. It is somewhat more contemporary than the reading from Isaiah. It is from the Nation/World section of the Bradenton Herald of yesterday. Headline one - **At least 35 killed in Nigerian Mosque bombing** – the article explains that 150 were injured. One bystander was quoted as saying “most of the dead were children and their parents.” It is thought that this was an attack by Muslim group Boko Haram against fellow – though more moderate - Muslims. Headline two - **Austin gunman dies after shooting at least 100 rounds** – “if you look at the targets that were hit,” said one officer, “it appears to be violent anti-government behavior.”

The reason I wanted to add headlines from our times is that they remind us things really haven't changed much. Scholars think that our reading from the Book of Isaiah comes from 3rd Isaiah, who we think lived about 200 years after The namesake of the Book. This Isaiah speaks to a generation of people immediately after the exile. They have been overrun and conquered by another empire and been forced to move far away from home. They are serving their conquerors in Babylon and they don't even know how to practice their faith because the first Temple has been destroyed. The prophet names the waiting and the longing of the people. “You are a great God... you have saved before with a mighty hand. Why don't you come now.” The people of God are suffering under violence and they hate the place they are living and they feel powerless. And they ask the same question that we might translate now, “Why doesn't God free us from ISIS and Boko Haram? Why doesn't God miraculously fix everything like the Almighty has done before?” We wait and long for a world of justice and peace and hope and healing. This is a deep human desire that has not changed over the millennia of human existence. We wonder why God doesn't come down here and “straighten those people out?”

And that little phrase, “those people” is where 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah reminds us that is not just humanity who has longing for change, but God longs and waits for the people to be different. 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah asks us to consider this - if God were to come down to straighten everything out, is God going to consider us part of the problem or part of the solution?

Headline # 3 is a humbling re-echo of that question - **UN panel criticizes US police shootings and torture** - the UN listed shooting of unarmed African Americans, the imprisonment of terror detainees at Guantanamo Bay without trial and the use of the Death Penalty as violations of the UN Convention against Torture that was signed in 1987 and ratified by the US in 1994.

We are reminded that when we point the one finger at those people, three point back at us. Part of our Advent work is to honestly look at ourselves. Oh, I know, none of us have shot up buildings or blown up a mosque, but when I ask myself if I have done all I can to heal the divide between white and black and brown in my own community, I can't say, "Yes." And if I ask, "Have I done all I could to make sure our nation does not prop up dictators that leads to the creation of terrorists?" I have to answer "no"

This time of waiting and longing is an important preparation for Christmas. We acknowledge and honor that we long for change – for peace – for joy – for justice. And we remember that ambiguous set of truths that given the size of the issues only God can bring healing – AND – God has no other hands or voice in the world than us. We are God's instruments here at Faith United Church of Christ to make a difference in the world. As we sing every week, let peace begin with me. This is how peace can spread – slowly like yeast raising bread. Sometimes this second truth is hard to bear. We are not sure we can do it, that we can make a difference. We need guidance and strength to be God's people. And the good news of Christmas is, God knows our need.

Headline 4 – **French President cheered in Ebola-stricken Guinea.** "There is Hope" said President Hollande, "The hope of those how have been cured. The hope that we can control this epidemic... The very fact that hope exists." President Hollande is the first leader in the "West" that has visited the Ebola stricken nations of Africa. He did not come bringing solutions. He did not say, "I am going to single-handedly eradicate Ebola." Because he does not have that power. Instead he brought hope. He brought hope by coming to be with the people of Guinea. On behalf of the people of France, he flew to a place where many fear to go and said, "We are with you. You are not alone in the work

ahead.” These are also God’s words to us at Christmas. “I am with you – no matter how hopeless the situation seems – and the time of Jesus’ birth was very much like the time of 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah and even our time today – no matter what you face, in coming to us in a little refugee child in a war torn occupied country God says, “I will be with you... my light cannot be overcome by the darkness.”

For what do you wait and long this Advent season? What seems impossible, insurmountable, utterly in chaos and ruin in your life? From what or who are you estranged; a place, a person, hope, faith, love? Oh the world will offer us plenty of distractions from such deep and troubling questions – good food, great music and new toys no matter what our age, but these questions are the real gifts of Advent because it is only by knowing our shadows and places of despair, that we can be vulnerable enough to let the Christchild come into us, to live in our hearts and change us and thus change the world.

Let us not hurry to the manger, friends. The light of Christ is truly understood only when we are willing to see the parts of our lives that edge on despair. Prepare us, O Christ, to receive you. Give us the strength to keep waiting and the courage to face the deep longings that cling to our souls. AMEN

**Isaiah 64:1-9** 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! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

The Message Version

Isaiah 64 1-7

**Can We Be Saved?**

Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and descend,  
make the mountains shudder at your presence—

As when a forest catches fire,  
as when fire makes a pot to boil—

To shock your enemies into facing you,  
make the nations shake in their boots!

You did terrible things we never expected,  
descended and made the mountains shudder at your presence.

Since before time began  
no one has ever imagined,

No ear heard, no eye seen, a God like you  
who works for those who wait for him.

You meet those who happily do what is right,  
who keep a good memory of the way you work.

But how angry you've been with us!

We've sinned and kept at it so long!

Is there any hope for us? Can we be saved?

We're all sin-infected, sin-contaminated.

Our best efforts are grease-stained rags.

We dry up like autumn leaves—  
sin-dried, we're blown off by the wind.

No one prays to you  
or makes the effort to reach out to you

Because you've turned away from us,  
left us to stew in our sins.

8-12 Still, God, you are our Father.

We're the clay and you're our potter:

All of us are what you made us.

Don't be too angry with us, O God.

Don't keep a permanent account of wrongdoing.

Keep in mind, please, we are your people—all of us.