

Sermon (12/3/17, Isaiah 64: 1-12):

So...last week, on one of those nights when we were all too tired to cook, we headed over to that fine eating establishment on Troy Road called Cracker Barrel. After our meal, we took a moment to wander around their store. It was filled with all kinds of Christmas stuff including Santas that sing and jiggle, flashy ornaments, giant candy canes, and a stand filled with a plethora of vinyl records. (You know, those round plastic disks that used to be the primary way we listened to our favorite music before CDs, IPODS, I-Tunes, Pandora, and a host of other options we have now-a-days.)

On a shelf below these vinyl records I spied something I hadn't seen since the days of my youth – a portable turntable. (A device we used back in the day to play those vinyl records.) Seeing that turntable brought back a flood of memories including one Christmas when my parents bought a similar turntable for me and my siblings to share. We were so excited!!! It was small, it had a hinged cover, and you could run it on batteries or by plugging it in. Wow! The possibilities this new and amazing device offered were mind-boggling! We could bring our music almost anywhere. We could even listen to our records outside, while playing in the yard!

It was a big purchase for my parents. I sensed that even though I was quite young. We were grateful and thrilled.

It was a pleasant memory resurrected by that Cracker Barrel turntable I spied. A good memory. A nostalgic, almost wistful, memory that evoked a sense of warm gratitude for a time long past.

I'd like to say it reminded me of a simpler time but I'm not so sure that would be accurate. I'm guessing that life was just as complicated back then as it is now albeit differently complicated. So maybe this has more to do with the nostalgia of being a kid. The delight of Christmas morning surprises. The touching memory of seeing the joy on my parents' faces when we opened our gifts. The bond we had as siblings, sharing the same family story.

It's a strange way to begin our count-down to Christmas, but this morning, on this first Sunday of Advent, we find Isaiah voicing a similar sort of nostalgic yearning. Life for his people had grown hard. They had

awakened to a new day filled with the tragic consequences of Babylon's victory over them. Their community was decimated, their families torn apart, their identity gone, their homes and businesses in rubble, and their place of worship laid in ruins. Everything that defined them, everything that gave their lives meaning had been turned to dust.

It is often in times of crisis like this when cherished memories of long past seem to hit us hardest. They fill us with a sense of longing for what once was – for kinder times, happier times, safer times.

In the after math of such a devastating and destructive defeat, the Hebrew people recalled the days when God seemed more tangibly present. The days when God freed them from slavery in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land. The days when God opened the Red Sea, so they could cross over in safety. The days when God protected the Hebrew people by creating a physical barrier between them and Pharaoh's mighty army. The days when God led them through the wilderness by way of a pillar of fire. The days when God rained manna and quail down upon them when they were so hungry.

'It was such a wonderful time,' they wistfully recalled. 'God's presence was so evident and so powerful. So much so that other nations stood up and took notice. Even the mighty Pharaoh buckled under the weight of God's miraculous interventions on our behalf.'

Now, they wondered where God had gone. Now, in this time when the future of the Hebrew people hung in a balance, they questioned where that pillar of fire had gone. Where was their Fixer, their Savior?

'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,' Isaiah exclaims on behalf of his people. 'O that you would gird up your loins and be God again. O that you would make the mountains quake like you did when you descended upon them to speak with Moses. O that you would light our way with a pillar of fire like you cleared a path for us in the wilderness. Where did you go God? Was not the enemy Babylon as great an enemy as the Pharaoh? Are we not worth saving?'

I remember back in September, when I met a clergy friend of mine for breakfast at Cracker Barrel. Even back then, the store was 'beginning to look a lot like Christmas'. I missed seeing the portable turntable, but I

couldn't escape the singing Santas and the glittering ornaments and the fancy tree in the middle of the store.

Christmas seems to arrive earlier and earlier even as the church's frail hand tries to hold it back just long enough for us to glimpse 'the man behind the curtain' as the Wizard said in the *Wizard of Oz*. The man behind the curtain of our daily pretense.

This is my thirtieth Advent as a Pastor and, each year, I am grateful for texts like this one from Isaiah that has a way of ripping off the superficial mask of what Christmas has become so that we might see the Advent we need. Even so, I must admit that the weariness of waiting sometimes gets the best of me. Each year we return to these texts reminding us of just how palpable our yearning is. The events that precipitate fear in us have different names today, but fear still stands firm. The reasons behind our worries might have different faces today, but the worry remains immovable. The sadness that feeds our tears today might come from new sources, but the reservoir remains plentiful.

Our world is still at war and the threats that shake our sense of safety still run rampant. Our struggles to find work that feels like a vocation remains real. Our climate continues to show worrisome signs of its unhealed injuries. Poverty and homelessness is still an ugly plight. We still painfully watch loved ones suffer from illness, hardship, and frailty and it breaks our hearts.

This year I am especially aware of those among us caring for parents whose bodies are failing them, whose minds are being stolen by dementia, whose loss of independence has made them feel helpless and broken. It's something me and my wife are experiencing ourselves. We love them so and it's all so very hard.

And, once again, in this rubble of decimation we cry out, 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!'

We know that God can do it. We've heard the stories. They've shaped us and continue to shape us. We've told them to our children and our children's children. We cling to them like one might hold onto the safety bar of a roller coaster as it descends that first ominous hill.

Thirty years and this is only a drop in the bucket when we think about

the generations before us! How many more Advents? How many more times will we have to pray this ancient prayer?!

About mid-way through today's reading, the prayer takes a bit of a turn. Once the honesty of frustration and anger is unloaded, a sense of humility rises to the surface.

“We have all become like one who is unclean,” Isaiah says. “We are like a filthy cloth, a faded leaf whisked away by the wind. This rubble we are standing in has our own fingerprints on it.”

The honesty of rage expressed and of personal failure confessed gives way to vulnerability. For the first time, hope has a chance to creep in because hope begins when we cede the need to be in control. Hope begins when God is invited to be the Potter again, shaping clay, namely us, that is pliable and adaptable to the God who makes all things new.

It is only then when we begin to realize that the source of our frustration is not the fact that God is silent but the fact that we've been looking for the wrong kind of god. The Savior we are searching for is not the strongman who comes tearing through the front door. The God we yearn for is not the terrible pillar of fire that rips through the forest, spewing flames and smoke. The God we are seeking is not the one that causes the mountains to tremble and the nations to shiver. The Savior that is coming enters quietly, through the back door, like the backdoor of a backwater town called Bethlehem. The Savior we need will not redeem creation by force but by the underestimated power of divine grace. The Savior who will dry tears and bring hope to wistful longings will sneak in beside us just as he snuck into the lives of two peasants named Joseph and Mary.

For those of us willing to look behind the curtain, we will see that all those formidable threats that frighten us and stir up our deep despair, are not so powerful after all when compared to the one who stands besides us – Emmanuel, God with us. So, come, let us eat with this Holy One who sneaks in beside us to feed us with eternal hope. Come, for we are not alone. We will never be alone.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.