**Isaiah 63:16-17;64:1-8** November 29, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Advent 1

*Isaiah 63:16 You, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. 17Why, O Lord, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance…*

*64:1Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! 2As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! 3For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. 4Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. 5You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? 6All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. 7No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins. 8Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

This Bible reading, in a way, reads like a Richard Wagner opera. Okay, time for full disclosure. Almost all of my knowledge about opera, especially Richard Wagner opera, comes from Bugs Bunny. That might lead someone to say that I really have no idea what I am talking about. Maybe not. But… Do you remember this one? “Spear and magic helmet!” I thought so!

I hadn’t seen that cartoon for years. And then when I saw it again, it was marvelous. Wagner took 17 hours of opera to tell a story, Looney Tunes packed it into less than seven minutes—which admittedly may not do it full justice. Nevertheless, in that seven minute retelling—maybe you remember that cartoon—you feel all the emotions: you laugh, you cry, you cringe in fear, you burn with anger. All of it. I don’t know if the guys who wrote it were opera fanatics, or wanting to introduce kids to opera, or trying to poke fun at opera, or just trying to make a buck – maybe all of the above – but at the end of that brief cartoon you feel like you have been through an emotional spin cycle.

Which is my point of comparison with this reading.

I’m not sure how much you caught when you listened to Brien read the Old Testament reading. Did you hear the quiet comfort, the anger, the fear, the shame, the despair and the hope, all wrapped into a two minute reading.

In that respect this reading feels very different from most Bible readings. Most Bible readings, especially the ones we read in our Sunday morning worship services, are pretty straightforward. You might have two sides to the story, like Jesus and the Pharisees, but our readings are always pretty clear about which side we should be standing on and how we should be feeling.

That’s where this reading is so different. A full palette of different emotions is all wrapped into one believer’s heart. The prophet Isaiah comes off as conflicted, as someone who doesn’t know how he should feel. But isn’t he God’s prophet? Shouldn’t he know how to feel? Yet his emotions race from one extreme to the other. His internal conflict revolves around the central fact of Advent, the fact that his God is going to burst onto the human scene. And so, as we step into Isaiah’s skin, we too cry out,

**“Come, Lord Jesus! Wait. On Second Thought…”**

**I. Come, to set things right!  
II. On second thought, don’t come, because I am going to be in trouble  
III. Oh, that’s right. Come, because you are merciful!**

In our more serious moments, every believer looks forward to the time when God will come again to earth. By serious moments, I don’t mean “serious” as opposed to having fun, but “serious” in the sense of actually seriously thinking and living the faith we profess. This can include a lot of fun and joy. Like us, Isaiah was serious about his faith.

We won’t go into the details, but enough bad stuff was going on around Isaiah, that in 64:1 he prays a fiery prayer to God, ***“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!”***

Isaiah had had it with the God-haters, the Christ-mockers, the immoral, the greedy and the violent. “Shred the heavens, God! Drop down on earth right in front of them. Make them pay! But first, before you make them pay, make them afraid!”

This zeal for God and for what God wants, is not a bad thing. God wants us to love the things he loves, and hate the things he hates. He wants us to love him with all our heart, soul and mind. He wants us to love other people as we love ourselves. So, when we as God’s people see the opposite thing going on, we sometimes feel a righteous anger. It is *not* an anger about *us* being wronged or *us* losing out. (If that is all it is, then there is nothing righteous about it.) But if it is disgust over the fact that God is not honored, if it is shocking his will is mocked and disregarded, if it is sorrow in seeing other people mistreated, then it is a righteous feeling. That’s what the prophet feels in our reading.

God loves those who love him. So, how can he put up with all the wicked and evil in this world? Why does he make us, his people, put up with it? ***“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!”***

**II.**  And then, suddenly, in the middle of his prayer, right there in verse 5, a thought occurs to the prophet. He suddenly realizes—that he is part of the problem. His world crumples in on itself. He realizes that the very thing he hates, he is! In this moment of self-awareness, the prophet suddenly changes his tune as if to say,

**On second thought, don’t come! Because I am going to be in trouble!**

Listen to the change of tune in verses 5 and 6: ***“You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against [you], you were angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.”***

We see all the problems around us and we grumble and whine. We complain and shake our heads, but we are just the same thing. We, too, are human beings who go home from work and complain about people. Our lives have their share of selfish laziness, or hard work that is equally selfish. We don’t have the self-control in thought, word and deed that God desires. We sin much.

This is the essence of Isaiah’s emotional roller coaster. He can’t keep on pointing at other people and insist, “If only God would get rid of all these rotten people around me, our world would be so much better.” ***“We continued to sin against you… All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.”***

Isaiah’s lament continues, ***“No one calls on your name,”*** that is, no one prays to and seeks God as continually and fervently as we ought. ***“No one strives to lay hold of you,”*** that is, no one is really serious about God. We have our times and places for him, but first place? Always?

Isaiah had wished that the Lord would come and eliminate evil from the world he is forced to live in. But Isaiah realizes that if God did that, he, Isaiah, would be eliminated.

When Isaiah prayed, ***“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,”*** he painted himself into a very tiny corner.

This is the territory every true Christian inhabits. When we look at ourselves only and honestly, we have this continual realization that our relationship with God cannot be based on our holiness. Our goodness, our moral closeness to God is an imagination. We cannot imagine that we are some sort of elite of humanity, some sort of people who have proven themselves more worthy. We are sinners!

**III.** And so Isaiah is led to the only place he can have any hope: ***“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.”*** And in the verse beyond our reading: ***“Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord; do not remember our sins forever.”***

Isaiah realized that since we are part of the sin problem that afflicts this world, he realized that he can only do one thing, and that is to throw himself on God’s mercy. Isaiah’s own anger at the world around him founders. He cannot condemn the world without condemning himself.

This is where Christians find themselves. When we are most spiritually illumined, we realize that we cannot insist on God being *only* holy and just. Because if he were, we would be like dried up leaves, blown about by the wind to who knows where, bursting into a flash of heat and light at the first touch of fire, and then nothing but ashes. This is what would happen if God were as holy and just with us as is our due.

We must rely on something other than God’s holiness and justness. We must rely on his mercy and grace. As Isaiah, we call God our loving Father. We call him that for good reason. As a Father, God knows our weakness and looks on us with pity. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. He finds joy in providing what we lack. Not because he has to, but because he wants to.

In our reading God is also called Redeemer. This is a really important Bible word. ***“Redeemer”*** contains the heart and soul of the Christian faith. A redeemer in the non-Biblical sense was a person who bought another person out of a bad situation. You could redeem people out of captivity, out of prison, out of slavery. You didn’t buy the people to own them. You bought them to free them.

God is our Redeemer. And for us in the New Testament, we know that it is especially the work of God the Son. He is our Redeemer. He paid the debt of our sin, our sins committed both before and after we became God’s. He has bought us to live free from sin’s slavery.

And so Isaiah, whose fiery zeal had been turned into trembling fear, now finds his balance. It is not in his moral superiority to the world around him, but in the nature of who God is. God is merciful and loving.

It is the most precious thing there is about the people who love us. We know that even when we have done everything wrong, they deal mercifully with us. When we have made a fool of ourselves, they accept us. The world may mock us. We may not be able to show our face in public. But with them we find acceptance.

And through faith in Christ Jesus, we find the same thing with God. That is why we come back here to worship God every week. We come because the only way to resolve all the things going on in the world around us and here inside of us, is through Christ Jesus. In God’s house we hear the pronouncement of the forgiveness of our sins. We are strengthened, encouraged and informed by the Word of Life. And when we fall into either opposite spiritual emotion: self-righteous zeal or self-condemning guilt, we are reminded of the forgiveness God freely gives us through Christ Jesus.

There is a beloved hymn—not an opera, but a hymn—which, if it wasn’t inspired by these words of Isaiah 64, does still capture the feeling of this prophet. It reflects emotions that range from ferocious zeal to fearful terror, but which found peace, a balance, in God’s mercy. It sings how the first coming of Christ at Christmas rightly informs us about his second at the end of time. I close this sermon with the third verse of the beloved hymn, “Abide with Me.”

*Come not in terrors, as the King of kings,  
 But kind and good, with healing in thy wings,  
Tears for all woes, a heart for ev’ry plea;  
 Come, Friend of sinners, thus abide with me.* Amen.