Yr. B, Advent 1
December 3, 2023
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
Christ Episcopal Church
1333 Words

Lessons: **Isaiah 64:1-9**
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
1st Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

Let me offer a little advice. If you are invited to say the blessing at the Thanksgiving dinner table, do *not* pray like the prophet, Isaiah. He sounds *so*…desperate when he cries out, "LORD, please tear open the heavens and *come down here to help us*!"

I will not ask for a show of hands of those who felt they *did need* divine help navigating the big, volatile, Thanksgiving table, but we all know it's not polite to pray for the LORD's help quite so vociferously.

I mean, Isaiah nearly seems to be taunting God into action. "C'mon now, LORD, you've *done it before*. You helped our ancestors in the *past*. Why are you hiding yourself from *us*? Why are you *allowing us* to be blown away, like dead leaves tossed by the wind?"

See what I mean? If you pray like Isaiah, you may not get invited *again*. (I don't mean invited to say the *blessing again*. I mean invited back to the *table* again.) We like our prayers to be more refined than this. We want our prayers to sound nice and easy…less biblical, for sure; but—*you know*—more suited to polite company.

In all fairness, Isaiah is praying on behalf of a religious community that had become utterly disillusioned with God. They knew all the right things to believe *about God*, but they were deeply disillusioned with waiting *for God.* Have you experienced a painful waiting for God to act…*to decisively act* in some way…and you felt as though your 'polite prayers' were not working?

That's when you pray for the heavens to be ripped open and for God to come down here and do something! That's when you start to express—*honestly express*—your disillusionment. And it's okay, God knows the truth *already.* "Almighty God," we pray, "to you all hearts are open, all desires *known*, and *from you* no secrets are hid…" Right? Now, we're getting somewhere.

But first, I want to take us back—back in time to one of the early stories…*in the beginning*…"*before* the plants and herbs of the field had sprung up…*before* the rains had fallen from the sky, the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and *breathed*…breathed into his nostrils the breath of life…"[1]

Y'all, we worship an earth-loving God—who is very much 'hands-on' down here. We worship a *people*-loving God—'hands on' in the formation of individual, human vessels of life and grace and love. And it takes time…and effort. And—*especially for us*—it takes patience.

The worldwide Christian community that gathers to worship in Taizé, France sings a song of encouragement about all this. It's a perfect song for Advent. It's a perfect song for *today*, and so I'm going to teach it to you. It goes like this:

"Wait for the LORD whose day is near,
Wait for the LORD, be strong—take heart!"

[1] Genesis 2:5, 7

I believe the prophet, Isaiah, gathered up all the strength and courage he could muster, and he kept on praying: "Yet, O LORD…We are the clay, and you are our potter; we are **all** the works of your hand."

Isaiah remembered that we are all just dust; formed of the earth…shaped by God to receive the Divine breath of life…and to become vessels of this divine life and grace and love for as long as we live. And so we believe—even with our *impatient hearts* we believe that the LORD does *not* abandon the work of his hands!

"Wait for the LORD whose day is near,
Wait for the LORD, be strong—take heart!"

Our middle daughter, Finley, is an artist. One of her favorite media is ceramics. So I texted early Friday morning and asked her to tell me something about the relationship between potters and their clay. "Oh, and Finley," I said. "I need to know immediately, because this is for Sunday's sermon." (How's that for patience?!)

"Well, dad, the first thing to know is that 'throwing clay,' (as it's called by artists) it requires a lot of mental focus."

I can see that, and…I'm quite sure that God is up to the challenge. But how often do we imagine the silence of God—especially when we are struggling with doubts or fears or disillusionment—how often do we imagine that silence of God not as distance and hiddenness, but rather as exceptional, quiet focus and a deeply reverent, up-close, attentiveness?

"The second thing, dad, is to know that the clay must be centered on the Potter's wheel…otherwise it'll turn into a mess."

I can see how that also is true. I've no doubt that I would make a mess if I were to try my hand at pottery. Likewise, I don't doubt that God knows how to 'center us' on the wheel.

But it's hard—isnt it?—to want to remain centered, with this great world spinning all 'round us. There are so many shiny, wonderful things…so many bloody awful things…so many seductively luxurious things…and they are all *pulling at us* from every direction, all the time. We must be *still*, and wait for the LORD.

We must be as still as Adam—in the beginning, in God's dirty, earth-stained hands, being formed, shaped as the first human vessel of God's life and grace and love.

"Wait for the LORD whose day is near,
Wait for the LORD, be strong—take heart!"

"The third thing to know, dad, is that no two vessels are ever perfectly identical." Finley went on to tell me about an assignment she once had, making six matching bowls. Being a perfectionist, she found this assignment to be very frustrating. No matter how profoundly focused and attentive Finley was, there was *no way* those vessels were ever going to be completely identical.

What my daughter learned in that assignment is the truth that God knows. The truth is that perfection does not require all the vessels to be identical. It only requires that the vessels are united.

No two of us are alike, thank God. Nevertheless, we can *become* united, *together as one*…revealing the glory of God by holding the life, grace and love of our Creator. "We are the clay, O LORD, you are our potter."

Today's Gospel lesson sounds pretty scary, doesn't it? The sun, darkened. The moon, shut off. Stars falling from heaven. Whew, talk about disillusioning! That sounds like it would be the worst.

Yet, Jesus wants us to know that even in the midst of that much disillusionment, we are not alone. God has not hidden from us. Our LORD remains profoundly focused and attentive, never giving up on the clay being shaped in his dirty, earth-stained, hands.

And we *will see* the Son of Man coming again with great power and glory. The day *will come* when we will see that one perfect Vessel…of God's life and grace and love, whose Spirit has already been poured out *upon us*.

One of the things I have noticed in my life is that many people who have struggled terribly or suffered painfully or lost beloved family members or friends unfairly. These are often some of the deepest and most beautiful human vessels you'll ever see. In the darkest of times they probably prayed a lot like Isaiah.

They cried out to the LORD. They cried out for the LORD to come down here and do something. They honestly expressed their disillusionment with things.

And the Potter continued to hold their clay…with exceptionally quiet focus and attentiveness, shaping and forming these dear souls into vessels with spectacular depth and remarkable beauty.

We can learn from them. We can learn from their strength and courage.

And so, on this first Sunday of Advent, we give thanks for God's loving, earth-stained hands, holding us through this life. And we pray for the patience to remain centered before Christ, as we sing:

"Wait for the LORD whose day is near,
Wait for the LORD, be strong—take heart!"

Amen.