

“The Messianic Message” based Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Delivered on November 29, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Anyone who has been around church long enough, has likely heard this old joke. There was a man who lived along the water when a hurricane rolled into town. The order to evacuate came and a friend from church came by to pick him up, and take him to the emergency shelter about 30 miles inland. The man said to his church friend, ‘O ye of little faith. Thank you, but I assure you, I believe God will provide.’

Hours later the wind and the water were nearing full strength, and the man was on his porch, when a rescue boat came by and a woman from his church asked him to get in. The man looked at her and instead invited her onto his porch saying, ‘O ye of little faith, I don’t believe I need your boat, for I have faith that God will provide.’ The woman refused his offer and took the others in her boat to safety.

When the wind and rain was at its strongest, the man climbed to his roof. A rescue team put themselves at great risk to fly in with a helicopter to save the man, but yet again he refused, admonishing his helpers and saying, ‘God will provide.’ The helicopter left and a huge burst of wind knocked the man in the water, and it wasn’t long before he drowned, killed by the storm.

And so, this pillar of the church came before the thrown of God, rather confused. He said, ‘Lord, it seems as though I am in your presence now, yet you didn’t save my life. I trusted you and had faith that you would provide, yet you never came.’ And the Lord said to him, ‘What are you talking about my son? I provided for you a truck, a boat and a helicopter. What did you expect?’

Friends, today is the first of four Sundays in the season of Advent that lead up to Christmas. But this season means far more than just our anticipation of the Christmas holiday. It’s more than a time to buy gifts. Indeed, Advent is a time to be mindful of our time of waiting for God’s arrival. It is a time when we look at the history of God arriving, the presence of God in our hearts and the future when God will be fully among us. Like the season of Lent that leads up to Good Friday and Easter, Advent is meant to be a time of reflection and prayer.

Right now, in this year 2020, we understand waiting, perhaps better than ever. We have been waiting since March to return to some degree of what we’d call normal. We have come off a Thanksgiving holiday, where to see loved ones represents a risk, and so, we got ourselves tested, quarantine, wear masks, or just stay outside, just to find something that resembles normal, but it is not normal. And so, many of us spent the holiday alone, or at least with far fewer loved ones than usual. And so, we are waiting for a vaccine, waiting for better treatments, waiting for anything that will ensure we can stop changing our lives.

And then in our culture we have all kinds of turmoil, we see injustice and racism, and we wonder when it will end. We see a disregard for human life from the womb to natural death,

with Christians and non-Christians alike, in life and death issues, making excuses. We say that our excuses for why things are allowed or even encouraged, is because of some measure of justice, a perception of someone's guilt, or another's innocence, and the idea personal freedom and the consequences for the choices people make.

But in reality, these excuses are more likely, and most often based on not wanting to make the sacrifices that need to be made, or not wanting to spend the money it might cost, be it for an individual or a government, to sustain life, to address causes of death and provide care, or seek reforms to address institutional injustice. We act helpless and want a higher power to sort it out, be it a government, or ultimately, that God will show up and sort it all out and save us from the responsibility and hard work of addressing these issues ourselves.

The passage from Isaiah this morning is written for or by a people in exile for their sins. Scholars argue about whether this was written by the first Isaiah, before the exile, or if it was written by a student of Isaiah who added on to the text while in exile. Personally, I believe that it was written by the original Isaiah before exile, and God was giving the people language to understand their plight, and a hope, which was not in an earthly savior like Cyrus, but in the suffering servant, the God of Israel, who would suffer with them and redeem them.

Can you identify with Isaiah in the opening lines of today's lament? I think we've all said words like this, "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so the mountains would quake at your presence!...so the nations might tremble!*" Today, in 2020, we might say, 'O that you would just take this virus away right now, and make it clear that it was your hand that healed us...so, everyone will know that we are not the crazy ones.' The Psalmist does the same thing in Psalm 80, which we used for our Call to Worship today. These were the recommended texts from the lectionary that are read every third year.

They made me think about the man in the joke. What did he really want? Did he want to be saved, for his life to be preserved? Clearly not as he refused help. I think the joke, and the laments in Isaiah 64 and Psalm 80, point to something else. They point to a hope not in the Lord, but to a hope in their own vindication. As people of faith, we live in a world that questions our faith. We want to give people proof, not that God exists or is real, as we say. But what we really want is to show everyone that we are the smart ones, we're right to believe. We want to convince others that that we are not wasting our time with all this going to church, giving, and obeying rules about sin. When we do this, perhaps our concern is not with God at all, but with the opinions of others.

I love how Isaiah blames God for the sins of the people, because I do this all the time. Isaiah tells God that in the past, God came down in creation and did mighty works. The God of Israel has been heard and seen, where other gods have not been. Essentially, the writer is pointing to that time right after the Exodus, and saying remember how faithful you were way back then, and

how the people believed when they saw you. Isaiah claims the people sinned because God was angry, and that because God had hid from them, the people transgressed, they sinned, and had become like the unclean, whose good deeds are sinful, like a filthy cloth, spreading dirt.

Of course, we should remember that Isaiah is the one being forgetful, not God. The people were led out of Egypt in a massive display of power from God, with plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, and still, it wasn't long before they wanted to go back into slavery in Egypt. It wasn't long before they wanted to turn to other gods again, especially once they were in the promised land at last, and in all of their uniqueness as God's chosen people, they still wanted to be like all the other nations, at times, choosing gods from other cultures, and wanting a king to be like the other nations, thereby rejecting God as their king.

Friends, since last March when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, I have been encouraging you periodically in sermons and the services to embrace your prayers of lament. When we lament, we express our frustration with God, we try to correct God as Isaiah and the Psalmist did. Lament is a form of prayer where we get to tell God what we think, how we would do things if we were God, if we were in charge. When we lament, we can express our anger toward God, our desire for things to be different, and, as we see in Isaiah, even blame God, yes, even blame God for our own sins.

It seems weird to say this, but this is an important part of our prayer life—to express our frustrations with God. The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to Romans that when we do not have the right words to pray, we even pray without words in our groaning, and when we do this, the Holy Spirit joins us in this prayer and groans with us. God is present in our prayers of lament, and in our frustrations.

Isaiah is so frustrated he says, 'no one is left who calls God's name,' and he says it is because God has hidden God's face from us, and delivered the people into sin and injustice. But then something clicks, as happens when we lament and we are open to God's Word. Here, Isaiah recognizes a truth he forgot. He says, 'You O Lord, are our Father, we are the clay and you are our potter. We are all the work of your hand' and Isaiah asks for mercy and forgiveness.

When we lament, we do not allow ourselves to sit on those things we are grumpy with God about and let them destroy our faith. Instead remain in communication with God, and when we remain in communication with God, we hear God, not in some booming voice from parted clouds, like the Hebrew National commercials. Rather, God speaks in our recognition of what God's Word says God desires from us, namely that we have a role to play in the reconciliation of all things through Jesus Christ by being the change we want to see in the world.

Friends, like the man in the hurricane, we are waiting for the Lord to provide for us without us having to do anything. And so, we look for some grand sign from God and we interpret the world around us. There is a temptation that in the midst of this virus and all the societal unrest,

to say that this is the sign that God is sending us, the reason to repent, to cry out like John the Baptist for others to repent for the end is near! We want God to come down now to us, and if God does not, we want God to send another kind of savior. We look for excuses to call someone our own Cyrus, and say things like, God will send someone who is flawed like that the King of Persia, who returned the Jewish people to Judea, to rebuild the temple.

Friends, the truth is that God has already come down. God has come down to share in our humanity, to live as we live, die on the cross of Rome, and then rise again for us. The truth is that Jesus is the one and only summons for us to repent. Cyrus returned the people to their land, but the presence of God did not return.

Indeed, God's presence was restored, but it was only restored when Jesus redefined the temple, being the true temple, the meeting place of heaven and earth, by sharing in our humanity as the Word of God made flesh, and it is by his sacrifice on the cross, his blood, sin and death have been defeated, and we have been cleansed as individuals and corporately as a church, to be temples of the Holy Spirit.

Paul opens his letter saying that he gives thanks that God's grace has been given to Corinth, because it has been given to them in the message of Christ Jesus, the anointed King. This has enriched the people, empowered them in every way, because they have the testimony or literally the 'witness' or message of the Messiah, the Christ, and it has been strengthened among them. This 'Messianic Message' is the source of strength and power, and it is not a message of future signs or another Cyrus, but the message that the one who lived and died, who rose again for them will return. We are given spiritual gifts, not to be idle, but to share in Jesus's work, so we are blameless, in the end.

The 'crux' of this message is that God is faithful and that is all that really matters. The pun is intended because the 'cross' is the 'crux' at the center of God's faithfulness. Because God is faithful, we are called into fellowship with God through the Son, who is at once our brother, having shared in our humanity, and also our God, sharing in the full divinity of God the Father and the Spirit, for he is Jesus our Messiah or Christ, and our Lord, the God of Israel.

As Christians, we have the Messianic Message. We are not to seek another messiah or savior. We are called only to the One who has come, the One who is our potter, the One whose life, death and resurrection, should mold us and empower us, to live and act in this world without fear of what others think, without fear of death and without fear of punishment for sin. Instead, we are to be empowered to love God with all that we have, to endure the suffering of this world, by loving others, putting others first, to preserve love and life, now and on to the new creation.

Friends, I want you to know that I am concerned by the things I see on social media and in our culture around us with all the end-times false prophets. Jesus said even he did not know the time or the place and the Apostle Paul, nor the others, knew when Jesus would return. So, why

would we think some guy or gal on television is better informed than Jesus, Paul or the other biblical writers. He's not. She's not. Whoever is preaching these predictions is not and Jesus warned us about them as false prophets. Everyone who has predicted the end of the world based on their interpretation of scripture has been proven wrong. Every single one.

Then there are those who would be clamoring for another earthly savior, or a sign of the end to warn us, because like the man who refused the truck, the boat, and the helicopter, we are looking for a future and missing the reality of our present moment. The Jesus who has already come and redeemed the world is not asking us to keep looking to the heavens for a sign, but calling us to act on the sign he has already given, himself, and for us to be the truck, the boat and helicopter, to bring people safely into his arms now.

Jesus warned against false Messiahs who would come after him, as he is the only true Christ, or anointed One, and if you think I'm ignoring the book of Revelation, remember what it is about, it is the Revelation of Jesus Christ, not another messiah. Rather it shows us gospel through a cosmic lens to console the faithful. Many of the events it describes are what the early church already saw in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and in their experience as persecuted believers. Revelation shows that the powers of sin and death are already defeated, and though the individual believer suffers now, we are only sharing in the suffering of Jesus, to be a part of the victory of God now and forever.

Jesus is the lion and lamb, and the victory of the lamb is already won on the cross. There is no sign we are to wait for, but only a call to answer the sign that has come. We are to live ready, actively participating in the reconciliation of all things, by loving God and neighbor, as we look for Christ, not another savior, to return and complete the victory he won on the cross, by restoring all things in his resurrection, now and forever.

The death of the messiah is proclaimed in how we live, how we love, even how we suffer. This is not that we should seek suffering to proclaim the death of the Messiah, but that in our challenges in life, we should reveal that our hope is something greater. We are empowered to share in the work of God's reconciliation, as citizens of the Kingdom of God now and forever. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italic***.

(1 Corinthians 1:3-9 NRSV) ***Grace*** to you and ***peace*** from God our ***Father*** and the Lord Jesus Christ. I ***give*** thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ ***Jesus***, for in every way you have been ***enriched*** in him, in ***speech*** and ***knowledge*** of every ***kind***-- just as the ***testimony*** of Christ has been strengthened among you-- so that you are not ***lacking*** in any ***spiritual gift*** as you ***wait*** for the ***revealing*** of our Lord Jesus ***Christ***. He will also ***strengthen*** you to the ***end***, so that you may be ***blameless*** on the ***day*** of our ***Lord*** Jesus Christ. ***God*** is ***faithful***; by him you were ***called*** into the ***fellowship*** of his ***Son***, Jesus Christ our Lord.