

A Justifiable Hope Isaiah 64:1-9 and John 1:1-18

Newsflash.

Sometimes, even the most church-goin', Bible-knowin', down-on-their-knees-prayin' people lose patience with God.

Take Isaiah, for example. Isaiah was a prophet of Israel during one of the darkest periods of that people's history. Actually, the Book of Isaiah had at least two, and probably three different authors. One section of Isaiah was written to Jews who had been conquered and taken from their homes to live in exile in Babylon. Much of what is contained carried a hopeful tone. That hope is grounded in the conviction that the power and sovereignty of God, would triumph over even the most formidable adversary. Isaiah's message was that God would soon liberate the exiles and return them to their homeland of Judea. This expectation was eventually fulfilled.

But the homecoming for those returning exiles was not the glorious occasion they had dreamed it would be. The nation they came home to, was largely in disarray. The magnificent Temple of God lay in ruins. The task of rebuilding their homeland seemed overwhelming. They questioned whether their hope in God's promises had been misplaced.

The job of a prophet was mainly to speak on God's behalf to people who needed to hear God's Word. Now and then, though, Prophets also backtalked to God. They gave God an earful of what the people were feeling. This is one of those times where Isaiah channels the people's loss of patience with God. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence!" The people were weary with waiting and hoping only to be faced with more bad news. It's like Isaiah is saying, "C'mon, God. Haven't we waited and hoped long enough?!"

Maybe you have felt those kinds of emotions yourself. It could be that the unlucky trifecta of a global pandemic, a national political crisis, and fears about how your own household will weather the pressures of economic uncertainty, are trying your patience and squeezing the life out of your hopes.

Advent is the season of waiting on the light of God to dawn on our darkness. The hymn we sang this morning—"O Come, O Come Emanuel, and ransom captive Israel"—echoes the desperation and the hope, that God would answer their prayers. Emanuel means "God with Us". But when difficulties drag on and on, we can question whether God is with us, after all. We can wonder whether a hope that is grounded in God's presence, is justifiable when God seems absent.

Advent is also the season of understanding how God is with us, and our hope in God is justifiable, because we relive the story of God's answer to our times of desperation. God answered the pleas of Isaiah and the Israelites to be rescued, not by tearing apart the heavens and setting the mountains to quaking; but by coming softly to earth in the birth of a child named Jesus. You won't find that story in John's Gospel. John omits the familiar nativity story. His Gospel lacks angels, shepherds and mangers. But what it does have is a strong justification for hoping in God.

The Gospel of John begins with a bold message: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

Jesus is the Word that is the perfect expression of God's nature. Those verses give us the foundation for a justifiable hope in God in what may seem like hopeless circumstances. If all things came into being through Jesus, and not one thing that exists or ever will exist was created through him, then there is nothing in all creation or for all time that poses a problem too big to be rectified by God.

Take the analogy of an author who creates a novel. From cover to cover there is nothing about the story that got there without the author's willing it to be there. There are no rogue characters who appear apart from the writer having created them. There may be drama, mystery and tension in the story that has us on the edge of our seat as we read it. But nothing that takes place can come as a surprise to the one who created the world contained in the novel. One way or another, all elements of the story can only end one way and one way only, and that is according to the author's design.

Jesus is both the author and the main character in the drama of the universe. John's Gospel describes him as "the light of all people" and declares that "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." There is no darkness—no problem—so big that Jesus cannot overcome it. That's not to say though, that there aren't some problems that only Jesus can overcome.

Even while Isaiah was lamenting God's seeming to be taking his sweet time about removing the burdens of his people, he did not fail to acknowledge the people's own responsibility for the situation they were in. "We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" he admitted. Isaiah understood that when God appears to be absent, our resulting hopelessness is a consequence not of God abandoning us, but of humanity turning its back on God. "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."

John's Gospel phrased it another way. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."

Much, if not all, of the unnecessary suffering and tragedy in the world, is not due to God not paying attention to what is going on; but of our own determination to ignore God in order to pursue a different path, and then suffering the consequences. All one has to do to see this in action is to observe the way in which the tragedy of the COVID pandemic has been made worse than it might have been by people ignoring the basic guidelines for controlling it through social distancing and wearing masks. You could almost hear God repeating to us all a quote that has gone viral lately: "I Don't Know How to Explain to You That You Should Care About Other People."

It follows then that:

1. Any hope for a better world does not rest solely with us, because we continuously are too much part of the problem to be the ultimate solution to the problem.
2. While God can and does deliver us from the consequences of what we do, the real change we need requires God to change US. And God does not do that without our permission.

Isaiah understood this. Even as he hoped for God to tear apart heaven and come to their rescue, he also understood that the Israelites' greatest hope for the future rested in seeing themselves as clay and God like a potter who reshapes them into something more recognizable as the image of God we are created

to be. We need to allow ourselves to be reshaped by God. How God is calling you to cooperate with God's redeeming love in today's world.

In John's gospel it is expressed this way: "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."

Advent is a reminder that our hope for a better life or a better world is not a shallow optimism or wishful thinking.

Our hope, when it is grounded in who God is, in what God has done in coming to us in Jesus, and who God calls us and equips us to be with the help of the Holy Spirit is the most justifiable hope of all.

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