

## *Hope*

<sup>NRS</sup> **Lamentations 3:21-26** But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup> they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." <sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. <sup>26</sup> It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

<sup>NLT</sup> **Hebrews 6:18-19** So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. <sup>19</sup> This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. It leads us through the curtain into God's inner sanctuary.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Mark 13:31-33** Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>32</sup> "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

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Last Sunday in adult Sunday school, Earl said that he wasn't going to cover any passages in Isaiah during Advent, because he figured I'd do enough of that. It's true that the lectionary tends to list texts from Isaiah during Advent. The one assigned to today begins with the first verse in chapter 63, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--." I hope that most of us understand God to be an abiding presence with us at all times. We can try to run from God, but there's nowhere that we can be out of sight and out of mind, so far as God is concerned. The reverse is possible. We can ignore God. Even though God is always pursuing us, always seeking to have a relationship with us, we can ignore God. We can decide that God is somewhere else or that God doesn't exist. Isaiah sounds like he's pleading for a third option. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--."

Isaiah wants the barrier between God and us to be ripped apart. Whatever it is that keeps us from seeing God plainly, hearing God directly – whatever it is that makes it possible to ignore God – Isaiah wants it to be torn apart. He isn't asking for a door to be opened, a curtain to be pulled aside. No, he's asking for whatever allows us to ignore God to be destroyed, demolished! Isaiah said he wants this so that the mountains would quake at the presence of God.

What do you think it would be like if God were to do as Isaiah asked? . . . . .

I was in a waiting room the other day, wishing that they had better magazines to help me pass the time. The one I was looking at certainly wasn't holding my attention. As a result, I overheard part of a conversation about a recent news story. "It was absolutely horrible. That's an unforgivable sin. At least we know for sure that she's burning in Hell right now!" The person talking sounded entirely certain, relieved in some fashion, and very glad that someone was getting the punishment he felt they deserved. I believe that they would be enthusiastic about Isaiah's idea. "Yeah! That's what we need! Shake some mountains! God could shake up a lot of people, too! People like that person in the news ought to have their eternal judgment pronounced by God – right here, right now! The ground could open up right under them and drop them right into hell. People could see the flames, smell the burning sulfur, and hear their screams of pain as they drop into Hell. That'd put the fear of God into folks!"

That's not quite what Isaiah had in mind, though. Isaiah goes on to say that God's obvious presence would really impress the nations. Then he writes about how people aren't very godly. Even their righteous deeds are pretty sorry and aren't worth much. Actually it's worse than that -- but I won't offend you with the earthiness of the Hebrew here. And then Isaiah goes on to say, "And yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter. We all are formed by your hand. <sup>9</sup> Don't be so angry with us, LORD. Please don't remember our sins forever. Look at us, we pray, and see that we are all your people." (Isaiah 63:19 NLT) Did you catch all of that? Isaiah says, "Despite our short comings, you're still our parent. You made us. We're your creation and we're your children. Please don't hold our sins against us forever."

Isaiah pleaded for God to be obviously present, right now, right here. Now, I know that this is the season of Advent, and we're supposed to be preparing ourselves for the arrival of the Messiah. But come on folks. We know how Advent culminates. Isaiah's prayer is answered with a resounding "Yes!" God does come. His name is Emanuel which means "God with us." Not only does God come to live with us, Isaiah's hope for what sort of presence matches closely with the event, as well. Isaiah pleads, "Don't be so angry with us, LORD." John's gospel says, **(John 3:17 NIV)** "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

At a basic level, we can find hope in the thought that Jesus didn't come to condemn, but to save. Those of you who saw the movie *Evan Almighty* a week ago may recall that Morgan Freeman, playing the part of God, remarks with sadness that many people want to live in fear of God. But we are called to live in hope. Jesus came, not to condemn, but to save. The word save here is the Greek word sozo. We need to become familiar with this word. It has broad meanings. It refers to freedom from disease, rescue from afflictions, saving from death – but more than saving from negative things, it also means to thrive, preserve, keep in good condition, and have general well-being. What's more, it isn't a verb form that refers to a event in the future but to continual action. John 3:17 doesn't say that Jesus came to do something to us in the distant future, but to be doing something with us continually! Not only do we have hope in the future, but we are offered hope in our lives now. "It is too late for any of us to worry about being perfect. We all have skeletons in our closets. There is enough in all of our backgrounds to make us blush deeply with regret."<sup>1</sup> But the good news is that, as Madeleine L'Engle put it, "All the evil that human beings have ever conceived or done is no more to the mercy of God than a live coal to the sea."<sup>2</sup>

This hope in God's mercy isn't a new thing that finally arrived with the birth of Jesus. A moment ago, we heard the beautifully expressed hope from centuries before Christ, as found in Lamentations. "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup> they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." We have God's steadfast love. It's always there. There's no end to God's mercies. They never diminish. It's like God's mercy and love is replenished at full capacity every morning. And God is my portion, my inheritance as a child in God's image, and so I have hope! So, Jesus didn't bring a new message of hope – but he hand delivered it!

In the sozo of God, in the continuing action of Christ, we find hope – hope that leaves fear behind, hope that transforms us from self-destructiveness to repentance, from anxiety to calmness, from loneliness to community, from fear to confidence, from envy to supporting each other, from hate to love. We have God's promise of love and mercy. And from our reading in the book of Hebrews, we know that it's impossible for God to lie. We've been told what it is that God requires of us – do justice, love mercy, and to walk with humility with God. And Jesus came, Emanuel, God with us, and he showed us how one walks The Way, the path with God. So, we can be completely confident, we can "fear not" as we hold onto that hope. It's our anchor in life. And it leads us right out of all that is distorted - and delusional - and twisted - and hurtful -- and into living a life in God's kingdom - living the way of Christ - living in peace with God, with ourselves, and with our neighbors.

It is a journey, a life-long journey. As we hold on to the teachings of Jesus, as we walk His walk, we travel out of the world we knew - and into the Kingdom that we come to know. Our old environment passes away as we see ourselves, our God, and our neighbors in a new light, in the light of God's love. Salvation, sozo, isn't just a moment of judgment with a wonderful outcome. Jesus came to be about the process of salvation, the process of redemption, the transforming of our lives, not the declaration that we are just, but the journey of justification. And anchored in the confidence in God's love and mercy, we move forward in hope.

We take this journey of faith, confident and filled with hope. Jesus said that we are to beware, to keep alert, because we don't know when the time will come. That passage used to fill me with fear. What if Gabriel's trumpet sounded just as I was doing something Mom had forbidden me to do? What if the second coming occurred just as I let angry and hurtful thoughts pass through my mind? The result was fear, not hope. But fear not, we are told over and over in scripture. Be anchored in hope, we're told.

When we walk, we take one step at a time. We don't glide, we stride. Walking, our natural mode of journeying, is done in increments, is steps. The journey of faith isn't a flowing continuum, but a succession of movement and pause Keep alert. Keep your eyes open. Keep your ears open. You never know when the Holy

Spirit will whisper an idea in your mental ear. You never know when simple wisdom will come out of a child's mouth. You never know when an opportunity to commit kindness will cross your path. You never know when some familiar scripture will glow with new meaning. You never know when the unlikely birth of a nobody in a nowhere village will be the unfolding of God's presence among us. You never know — unless you realize that the barrier between you and God is the barrier that you maintain. Hope is what dissolves the barrier. Have hope!

### **The Coming of God**

Our God is the One who comes to us  
 in a burning bush  
 in an angel's song  
 in a newborn child.

Our God is the One who cannot be found  
 locked in the church,  
 not even in the sanctuary.

Our God will be where God will be  
 with no constraints,  
 no predictability.

Our God lives where our God lives,  
 and destruction has no power  
 and even death cannot stop  
 the living.

Our God will be born where God will be born,  
 but there is no place to look for the one who comes to us.

When God is ready  
 God will come  
 even to a godforsaken place  
 like a stable in Bethlehem

Watch . . .  
 for you know not when  
 God comes.

Watch, that you might be found  
 whenever  
 wherever  
 God comes.

Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*

**(Isaiah 63:1, 8-9, NLT)** Oh, that you would burst from the heavens and come down! How the mountains would quake in your presence! And yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter. We all are formed by your hand. Don't be so angry with us, LORD. Please don't remember our sins forever. Look at us, we pray, and see that we are all your people.

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Claypool, *The Hopeful Heart* (Harrisburg, PA, Morehouse Publishing, 2003) p 67

<sup>2</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *Alive Coal in the Sea*