

**Worship Service – November 29, 2020**  
**First Congregational UCC, Eagle River – Advent One (Hope)**  
**L. Gail Irwin**

**Hebrew Scripture Reading:** Isaiah 64:1-9 (The Message translation) Marlyn Hupperts

*Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and descend,  
make the mountains shudder at your presence—  
As when a forest catches fire, as when fire makes a pot to boil—  
To shock your enemies into facing you, make the nations shake in their boots!  
You did terrible things we never expected,  
descended and made the mountains shudder at your presence.  
Since before time began no one has ever imagined,  
No ear heard, no eye seen, a God like you who works for those who wait for him.  
You meet those who happily do what is right,  
who keep a good memory of the way you work.  
But how angry you've been with us! We've sinned and kept at it so long!  
Is there any hope for us? Can we be saved?  
We're all sin-infected, sin-contaminated. Our best efforts are grease-stained rags.  
We dry up like autumn leaves—sin-dried, we're blown off by the wind.  
No one prays to you or makes the effort to reach out to you  
Because you've turned away from us, left us to stew in our sins.  
Still, GOD, you are our Father.  
We're the clay and you're our potter: All of us are what you made us.  
Don't be too angry with us, O GOD.*

**Sermon**

- I. We think of the season leading up to Christmas as one of anticipation and excitement
  - a. For children, it's about Christmas gifts
  - b. For adults, it's family gatherings, meals, parties, fun
  - c. For Christians, there are warm fuzzies in this season: a child being born, a new start for the world, the coming of peace
  - d. But in the church year, Advent is actually a season of penitence: a time for thoughtful reflection on our need for cleansing and forgiveness; acknowledging our distance from God and need for reconciliation.

- e. And this year especially, any anticipation is dampened by the times we're living in!
    - i. How do we celebrate in a climate where *one American is dying every minute from the coronavirus*?
    - ii. Where climate change is accelerating at a rapid pace?
    - iii. Where democracy is being threatened all over the world?
  - f. The world is clearly broken! If it wasn't, we wouldn't need a Savior to save us!
- II. And yet, I wonder if any of us honestly looks to God for help these days.
- a. Do we keep blaming somebody else for our problems?
  - b. Do we imagine that just a little more human ingenuity will fix everything around us?
  - c. Or do we think we can magically wish away 2020 and go back to a "simpler, happier time" once we get a vaccine?
- III. The prophets and psalmists wrote with a full-hearted faith that a loving God could both punish and restore God's people. I wonder if we live with that same expectation about God today.
- a. Do we need a Savior to save us--especially this year?
  - b. Do you yourself need to be saved from anything that only God can save you from?
- IV. In Chapter 64 of Isaiah, the prophet had returned to his city of Jerusalem after his people lived in exile for 70 years;
- a. During those years, his people longed for the good old days and wished they could go back to Jerusalem.
  - b. They naturally blamed the Babylonians for destroying their city;
  - c. But when King Cyrus of Persia allowed them to go back, they found Jerusalem in ruins, overgrown with weeds;
  - d. If they had ever indulged in nostalgia about the past, that was over now; they could only go forward with the slow rebuilding;
  - e. In this moment, the prophet realizes that he and his people are in fact the ones to blame for their predicament. Their unfaithfulness to God had caused their city to fall.
  - f. *Is there hope for us*, he asks God, *when we are so sin-infected*?
  - g. Yet Isaiah goes on to remember the ancient relationship between his people and Yahweh, how it was like potter to clay:
    - i. *You shaped us this way, God!*
    - ii. Is he blaming God for human weakness?
    - iii. Or is he suggesting that there is hope: that God can remold the people into a better shape for a new Jerusalem?
- V. Much later in history, Jesus spoke in Mark 13 to his followers about the hard times *they* were facing. In his case, Jesus foresaw Jewish persecution, and the destruction of the Second Temple, 600 years after the first Temple was destroyed. But there was a hint of hope in his predictions.

**Gospel Reading:** Mark 13: 19-20 and 28-31

*“These are going to be hard days—nothing like it from the time God made the world right up to the present. And there’ll be nothing like it again. If he let the days of trouble run their course, nobody would make it. But because of God’s chosen people, those he personally chose, he has already intervened...”*

*“Take a lesson from the fig tree. From the moment you notice its buds form, the merest hint of green, you know summer’s just around the corner. And so it is with you. When you see all these things, you know he is at the door. Don’t take this lightly. I’m not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too—these things will happen. Sky and earth will wear out; my words won’t wear out.*

*“But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven’s angels, not even the Son. Only the Father. So keep a sharp lookout, for you don’t know the timetable.*

- a. Jesus hints, even in the midst of frightening predictions, that signs of hope will be visible to those who pay attention.
- b. In the parable of the fig tree, he points out that those who are attentive might see the tiny green buds forming on the fig tree as spring begins, and with hope, they will already be able to taste in their mouths the sweet figs that won’t ripen until summer.
- c. That’s the quality of hope! Not waiting for evidence that things are getting better, but imagining, even without evidence, what that better world will be like.
- d. Both Isaiah and Jesus grasped for hope in dark times: it wasn’t about wishing things could be like they used to be; or wishing all their enemies would be destroyed. Hope is (as it says in Hebrews) *the conviction of things not seen*. Believing in things that haven’t happened yet.

**VI. *Hope is different than nostalgia, and requires something greater from us!***

- i. Nostalgia looks back and longs for what used to be: the old Jerusalem (something we’ve already seen and merely remember)
- ii. Hope looks forward and imagines something that has never been: the new Jerusalem!
- iii. Hope requires the capacity for creativity and vision; something we in the Church are not very good at these days.

**VII. In our time, we are surrounded by decay:**

- a. Covid illness and death is everywhere now
- b. The failures of government and civic leaders are apparent
- c. Church decline has been a reality for decades now
- d. This Christmas we will experience our own exile from our sanctuary, families and friends and beloved traditions like the Cantata and the elaborate decorations in the sanctuary and the packed house singing “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve.
  - i. It gets us nowhere to sit around wishing things were like they used to be
  - ii. How can we instead be inspired toward visions of a better future, a better world, a better church?

- VIII. I do wonder about the judgment of God; or at least I sense the need for introspection and inner cleansing; a need to learn from what is happening to us, or what we are causing to happen;
- a. I wonder if God really does have the power to correct and discipline and heal us, to heal our nation and the world's people, the way Isaiah saw God judging and healing his nation
  - b. This time feels to me like a little exile, in which God may be teaching us to stop looking backward with nostalgia and start looking forward with imagination to a new vision?
  - c. In separating us from each other, is God teaching us to more deeply value the intimacy and shared community She wants for us?
  - d. Is God re-orienting our Hope: not toward what used to be, but to wipe the slate clean, to pull down the old institutions and imagine something better that hasn't existed yet, after our exile is over?
  - e. As Isaiah reminds us: God is the potter and we are clay; so, do we open ourselves to the possibility of being re-shaped entirely?
    - i. If so, some of that re-shaping may hurt...
    - ii. But Christ holds out a promise: watch for the budding green around you and inside you; something better is coming!
    - iii. Imagine the sweet taste of that new world budding; for your personal life; for your family and friends; for your church; for your nation;
    - iv. Imagine the life God wants for us: what will it look like? Taste like? And hope for it.
    - v. We never know when or where it will break open; but it's nearer to us than we imagine!!

Amen.