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Isaiah 64
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It's Been Too Long

Good morning Church. Welcome to the first Sunday of Advent, a time of waiting for Jesus to be born. This may be one of my least favorite Sundays because I can see Christmas with all its light and cheer, but we are still far away. We have to wait. So this Sunday, I want us to ponder, "When was a time God was with you while you waited?" Write it down on that slip of paper the ushers gave you. And if the spirit leads you after the sermon, there will be a time to bring it up to the front. We'll post those slips on the bulletin board next to my office. I must warn you this scripture is a letter from the end of the world. It's full of darkness and despair. I will not guide you out but welcome you into the darkness of Advent.

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you—our potter who created us and gave us hope in times of trouble.

The temple is destroyed, and the people are exiled from their land. The world they knew is burned, and they choke on the ash. How would you react in the face of devastation?

- 1) Would you listen to the advice of Job's wife to curse God's name and die? I've heard that from some people saying how they prayed to God, but still, horrible things happened. Do we blame God for not acting? Do we accept pain as a part of life?
- 2) Would you blame people for being too ignorant or reckless? I know during the pandemic, people saw superspreader events and cursed the organizers under their breath. Such foolish people, you brought destruction down upon themselves and their communities.

How would you react in the face of devastation? These examples are human. They are understandable. I've traveled through these throughout my life, and perhaps some of you have visited our own personal or societal devastations. I hope that this letter from the end of the world can be a source of comfort that there is a future after the end of the world.

Isaiah 64 comes to us from near the end of the exile. That 70-year, generation-spanning tragedy left the people of God both broken and reborn. Here, the successors of Isaiah (Isaiah of Jerusalem was already an old man when the exile began) grew up with the absence of God, hearing stories about the end of the world when God's footstool, the temple, and God's connection to the Earth was thrown down and burned.

*Our holy and beautiful house,
where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned by fire*

They grew up hearing they were children of an absentee father.

O LORD, you are our Father; yet you have hidden your face from us.

Perhaps they feel the words of Ecclesiastes,

All that is done without God is vapor, merely chasing the wind

When they express their frustration:

all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth

Last week, we heard about Ezekiel, who lived through the catastrophe. He blames the leaders of Israel, but for the successors of Isaiah, the tragedy is so far in the past that the reasons do not matter. All that matters is the desire to go home.

Sometimes, I look at the photos of Palestine, and I keep seeing these keys. I learned that these keys are symbols of how, when Zionism formed the modern state of Israel, Zionist militias forced 700,000 Palestinians to flee their homes. However, they kept their keys, thinking that they would be able to return. This event is called the Nakba or catastrophe. And so, as I look on at Gaza, I still see those keys, still see people hoping to return to their homes over the border in what is now Israel.

Puts Isaiah's vision in the next chapter in perspective (Isaiah 65:21-22).

*They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat,*

And here we sit in Advent, waiting for the coming of the Christ child. Who will be born under Roman military occupation. Who will be born into a people, some of whom think their salvation comes from military revolution, some who want a Hamas-like resistance, Theologians call this political movement the zealots.

Please join me in praying for peace both in our local communities and around the world. I am frustrated by the end of the world. Crying out, how long, Oh Lord must we wait? Hasn't the world suffered enough? Yet, nations still plunder each other, sending others into exile. Even the land we stand on today is marked by that cycle. This land used to belong to the Yokut people. How will their ancestral land be returned to them? I pray that we can learn from this passage how much it hurts to be severed from one's land so that we never do it again. And no matter how often the world ends, let us be comforted that there is a future on the other side. There is a heavenly mountain that God invites us to work toward.

*The wolf and the lamb shall feed together;
the lion shall eat straw like the ox,
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the Lord.
Amen*