

# A Promise of Hope: Redemption and Forgiveness

## Isaiah 63:16b-17; 64:1-8 (Advent 1)

People are getting ready for Christmas. How are you preparing for Christmas? In the last few days, my street which was dark two weeks ago except for a few street lights is now lit up with beautiful Christmas lights and decorations. I haven't put anything up yet and as a result my house seems to be one of the darkest on the street. Even when I do put lights out, it's just one of those projector lights you put in the ground and it shines on the house. Are you putting up Christmas lights or decorations? How about decorating a Christmas tree? As I leave my subdivision there is a place on the highway selling pre-cut Christmas trees. I've seen trees on top of cars and in trucks being taken home for families to decorate. Whether it's real or artificial, have you put your Christmas tree up? I haven't but we plan on putting ours up in the coming days. How about an Advent calendar to help you count down the days to Christmas? If you use something like that, maybe you have a really nice one or found one in the store where each door reveals a delicious chocolate piece, a lego figure, a pair of socks, or, for the adults only, a little bottle of wine or a craft beer? Of course there are so many other things we do to prepare for Christmas like Christmas shopping, gift wrapping, carol singing, and holiday baking. Those are all outward and fun ways that we could prepare for Christmas, but does all that preparation really matter?

Advent is indeed a season of preparation. It is a time of preparing to celebrate God's promise being kept through the birth of that little baby born in Bethlehem all while keeping mind that Jesus is coming again. So how do we best prepare for that? We can do all of those things I mentioned, but when he comes again if the heart is not prepared for his arrival it doesn't matter how many lights we put up, how beautiful our tree is at home, or if enjoyed the best holiday treats. Perhaps as we begin this season of preparation, to be truly prepared for Christ's coming, we need to understand how we need Jesus to come. Do we need him to come with saving grace or in perfect judgment?

God has always promised to come with his power both in grace, undeserved love, as well as in perfect judgment. That's what the prophet Isaiah is pleading with God to do, to come. **"Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and come down. Mountains then would quake because of your presence. As fire ignites stubble and as fire makes water boil, make your name known to your adversaries. Then nations would quake in your presence. You did amazing things that we did not expect. You came down. Mountains quaked because of your presence. From ancient times no one has heard. No ear has understood. No eye has seen any god except you, who goes into action for the one who waits for him. You meet anyone who joyfully practices righteousness, who remembers you by walking in your ways! (64:1-5a)**

Isaiah is pleading with God to come down with the same kind of power which causes brushwood to burn up suddenly and which stirs up water to boil violently. He wants the Lord to display his strength over Israel's enemies, as he did in the past. We can think of such times in Israel's history when the Lord demonstrated his awesome power both in judgment on his enemies and in grace to rescue his people - the plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, and the destruction of Jericho just to name a few. Isaiah reminds the Lord of his kindness to those who wait for him to act and then joyfully walk in his ways obeying his commands.

But if this is true, then why are the people of Israel, his chosen people whom he loves, experiencing God's anger and judgment? Isaiah finds the answer not only because they sinned but in Israel's persistence of their sinful ways. **"But you were angry because we sinned. We remained in our sins for a long time. Can we still be saved?" (64:5b)** Israel had rebelled against God. They had become hardened and callous toward their sin as if God would be okay with whatever they did. Sin was a way of life for Israel. In fact, the people of Israel had been so persistent in this

business of hardening their hearts that the prophet cries out as though in despair under the threats of God's coming in judgment. "Can we still be saved? Is there any hope for Israel left at all?"

How descriptive are the poetic pictures Isaiah paints for us to describe Israel's natural rebellious sinful state, and how clear it shows us ours! We are really no different than Israel as we persist every day in our sin. God's judgment on sin without his promise of coming in grace leaves us feeling hopeless. **"All of us have become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like a filthy cloth. All of us have withered like a leaf, and our guilt carries us away like the wind. There is no one who calls on your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you. So you hid your face from us. You made us melt by the power of our guilt."** (64:6-7)

Someone labeled as "unclean" was ceremonially unfit to stand in the presence of God. All of us, Isaiah says, because of our sins against God's perfect commands are unclean before God. Sin makes us so unclean that those good deeds, which in their outward appearance in our minds should have pleased God, are really nothing more than "filthy cloths". Even the best of our actions are nothing more than dirty, bloody menstrual rags. Before God's perfect judgment they are like cloths stained with the blood of a woman's period. In fact, that's what Isaiah pictures for us - a dirty, bloody, filthy rag that is permanently stained. That's what sin does to our so-called "righteous acts", our best looking actions, before a holy and just God.

Like the wind blowing dry leaves away in the fall, so we deserve to be carried off into destruction unable to rouse ourselves to take hold of God. It is as though God hid his gracious face from us, and our guilt causes us to melt at the thought of being in his presence like wax that melts when exposed to fire.

Sin began with the fall in the Garden of Eden. It has infected the entire human race ever since. Sin is ugly. It is infectious. It taints everything, even the best we can produce by ourselves. It leads us to despair and destruction. Isaiah pictures sin as it really is with all its devastating, destructive power. Because of sin we are left hopelessly unable to help ourselves and guilty before God's coming perfect judgment. Our guilt leaves us crying out with Isaiah, "Can we still be saved? Is there any hope at all for us?" How badly we need God to come to us in his grace, his undeserved love, and take hold of us. How much do we continually need God to give us hope in the hopelessness of our sins!

That's what God's promise of Jesus first coming is. It is a promise of hope that with a father's unconditional love for his children he would come with what we need the most - the hope of redemption and forgiveness. Isaiah writes, **"But now, Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are our potter. All of us are the work of your hand."** (64:8)

As a potter fashions items out of nothing but lifeless clay molding it carefully to fit his own useful purposes, so the Lord had formed his people Israel to be his among all the nations of the world. The Lord himself had raised them, guided them, preserved them and disciplined them, and yes even exalted them to be the clay pot through which he would bring the hope of redemption and forgiveness to a world lost in sin. Despite Israel's sinfulness and rebellious ways, God adopted them as his children. It was purely an act of grace.

In that same grace, God gives us hope in the hopelessness of our sins. In his Fatherly love he promised to send his only Son to take our place. Jesus came to suffer and die to redeem us, purchasing us from sin and death by paying the price those sins owed before God. It is through his holy and innocent blood shed on the cross we have forgiveness. The guilt that made us unclean and filthy before God has been washed away. Through God's promise of hope, in Jesus' first coming we have redemption and forgiveness as a gift of his grace. We waited for God to act. We

put our hope in him because we couldn't and cannot save ourselves. Now we live in that hope every day as our lives are shaped like clay in our potter's hands.

Like a potter fashions items out of nothing but lifeless clay molding it carefully into what he wants it to be, so we are the work of God's hands desiring to serve him as his redeemed and forgiven children by walking in his ways. What he now sees in us is no longer those unclean filthy rags. He sees good works that are pleasing to him all through faith in Jesus, the embodiment of God's promise of hope. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, **"Indeed, it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance so that we would walk in them."** (2:8-10)

This Advent season, we look forward to celebrating Jesus' first coming as God promised on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. We can decorate our houses, our trees, and open doors to count down the days, but it is only as Christ comes to us through his Word and Sacrament that we are truly prepared every day for Jesus' second coming, a day you cannot put on the calendar. So may our hearts be made ready for that coming through worship together, family devotions in our homes, and faithful study of his Word. Relying on God's promise that alone can give us the hope of redemption and forgiveness through Jesus, we live in that hope promised and hope given every day. So every day prepared through his coming in grace and unafraid of his coming again in judgement, we long with the prophet Isaiah, "Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and come down." Amen



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