

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

First Sunday of Advent • December 3, 2017

Isaiah 64:1-9 • Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 • 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 • Mark 13:24-37

One Wednesday night last fall, during our study on the Reformation, we were reading a letter that Martin Luther wrote near the end of his life. It's a letter called "Consolation for Women Whose Pregnancies Have Not Gone Well." It was written in response to a pastor who asked for some advice on how to talk to women who had had miscarriages or whose children died shortly after being born. And, just like today, miscarriage had a lot of social stigma around it. People thought that if you had a miscarriage, you must have done something wrong. So it was something you kept to yourself. And there's a little line in the letter where Luther refers to the experience of having a miscarriage as "our darkness." And one of our members, who has a good eye for Lutheran theology, says, "I like that it's *our* darkness." It's not *my* darkness or *your* darkness. It's *our* darkness. That darkness isn't something private. That experience of darkness, of grief, of despair is something that we often share together.

That experience of communal grief was something the prophet Isaiah knew well. About six hundred years before Jesus was born, the southern kingdom of Israel was invaded by the Babylonians. And many of the Israelites went into exile. At first it was just the upper classes that were deported. People with tangible skills that could be useful to the Babylonians. And then about ten years later, the Babylonians started deporting more people. People who were starting to resist living under the Babylonian occupation. Not everyone goes into exile. There are some Israelites who stayed and just payed taxes to someone else. But now the Israelites are spread out. This is the beginning of the Jewish diaspora. The Israelites have to figure out how to live as a people in their new homes.

In their understanding, this exile was something of a self-inflicted wound. Many of the Israelites believed that they had been pushed into exile because they hadn't been faithful to their covenant with God. So the covenant, the promised land, the temple, looks like it's all over. This new diaspora community, this community with no real religious or cultural or military center anymore, is going to be their new normal. One prophet even advises the Israelites to get used to it. Settle down. Have kids. Seek the welfare of the city. Get comfortable because you're not going anywhere.

And then about sixty years later, something happens. The Persian Empire, led by King Cyrus, conquers the Babylonians. And when Cyrus finds these Israelites living in exile, he says that they can go home. Now this should be a happy ending to the story. The Israelites were conquered and sent into exile. They get a lucky break thanks to another invasion, and then they get to go back to normal. But that's not what happens.

Because now the Israelites, the descendants of the people first sent into exile, have to figure out how to go home. How to rebuild. How to make a new community. And without the nostalgia for home to bring them together, a bunch of tensions start to emerge. One of those tensions is over what it means to be a "real" Israelite. Because the experience of being in exile was so formative to some Israelites, that they said that going through that exile experience was what made them the true center of the community. But other people who were left behind say that they never left Israel, so they were the true Israelites. Another conflict is over where the center of Israel is. Some people think that the real center of Israel is in the cities. To be an Israelite is to be an urbanite. And some other people think that the real heart of Israel is in the rural areas. The center of real traditional values is in the countryside. This has no parallels to today.

And then they have the most important social question of all. If the Israelites were sent into exile because they broke the covenant, the obvious question is: Who broke the covenant? Who is

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responsible? And so the Israelites do what we all do after a cataclysmic event: they look for a scapegoat. They look for someone to blame it on. Someone that they can agree is responsible for the misfortune that's fallen on them. A group that they can put the blame on so that they can draw themselves back together. So that they can say, "The problem was never us. The problem was always you."

And besides all of those social questions, they have one overarching question they need to get figured out. Which is what happened to their relationship with God? Are they still the chosen people? Is God going to redeem Israel? Is God going to take them back into the covenant?

Today's reading from Isaiah is the lament, the despair, of a prophet asking how these people are going to put themselves back together. Because the people seem so divided. And because God feels so far away. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," Isaiah says. If only God's presence among us was clear. Something we could all point to and say, "There it is. God's back." But for Isaiah and most us, it isn't that clear. For Isaiah and the Israelites, there was a time in the past when it did feel that way. Isaiah talks about how God used to do such interesting things. There was a time, Isaiah laments, "when you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence." There was a time when the Israelites could all tell that God had their back. Not anymore. Now it looks like they have to go it alone.

One of the images people use when they talk about the church during Advent is of a people standing on their tiptoes. Trying to see a little more of the horizon so they can see when the sun is going to come back up. It's kind of cute. But for Isaiah and for most of us it feels like more and more people are starting to turn in, saying, "I can't keep waiting for something that's never going to happen. Text me if you see anything." No one wants to wait up for something that's never coming. And no one wants to be the one telling people to stay awake for something you fear might never show up.

When you installed me as your pastor last March, one of the things you charged me with was not to provide that kind of false hope. Will you, the liturgy reads, "giv[e] no occasion for false security or illusory hope." So what is false hope? Because it seems like just about any hope is illusory hope. Because it seems like if you're not cynical, if you're not jaded, if you're not skeptical, you're not paying attention. Be realistic. Be pragmatic. Be sensible. Hope is for suckers.

That's the message we hear about our churches. That we are in the process of inevitable decline. The best days of the church are behind us. That's the message we hear about our communities. That addiction is too rampant to do anything about. That injustice is so calcified in our institutions that they're irredeemable. That's the message we hear about ourselves. That abuse is just something you have to put up with if you want to get ahead. That you are undeserving of a second chance even though others seem entitled to dozens. We hear plenty of false prophets who try to get us to hope less. Plenty of false prophets who say, "Get comfortable. Settle down. You're not going anywhere."

But what makes hope false hope is not what it aspires to. It's not what it believes God is capable of. It's not what it believes is possible. It isn't where it's going. It's where it starts. False hope refuses to acknowledge grief and despair. False hope tries not to make eye contact with suffering. False hope wants it to be someone else's problem. False hope is hope that can help you, but only if you're doing okay to begin with.

The hope that Isaiah is talking about is no false hope. The prophets of false hope say that the way to build a stronger community is by kicking someone out. The prophets of false hope say that the way to build unity is by making other people more like us. The prophets of false hope say that you don't have to take any responsibility. That you can always blame it on someone else.

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The hope that Isaiah is talking about, the hope we wait with this Advent season, is something much bigger than that. It's a hope that involves all of us. In the Hebrew, *Kulanu*. Who is responsible for our covenant with God? Isaiah says it's all of us. Who is responsible for the state of our community? All of us. And Isaiah goes on, who is this new restored community for? All of us. Who gets to call themselves a quote-unquote "real" Israelite? All of us.

We love to make it complicated, to divide people, to label people. To judge others by their worst examples. To take our own experience, our own ideals and make that the standard for participating in the life of the community. To say that "all" can't possibly mean "all." We make it complicated, but Isaiah makes it simple. There is no us and them, there is only us. All of us together. *Kulanu*.

Advent is a season of waiting. But it's a particular kind of waiting. Not just sitting on our hands. Not just standing on our tiptoes. The kind of waiting that Isaiah invites us to is a prophetic hope. A hope that is attuned to the grief and despair that we paper over. A hope that creates the community that it waits to experience fully. A hope that sees my salvation as bound up in yours. A hope that we find in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

"You are the potter," Isaiah writes. "We are the clay." We are being formed. Being formed into disciples. Being formed into the body of Christ. Being formed as a people of hope. Even in our grief. Even in our despair. Even in our darkness.

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