

Praying in a Minor Key

Isaiah 64:1-9

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Advent is a strange time of year, at least in my own Presbyterian tradition. We start the celebration just after Thanksgiving with texts like this one – gloom and doom. The coming judgment. Apocalyptic visions. This puts the church out of step with what’s going on around us. The rest of our friends are already having a holly, jolly Christmas, humming along to the syrupy sound of department store carols. The rest of our neighbors are feeling good, and when people feel good, the cash registers start ringing, and sales executives start singing to the sounds of cha-ching. Fresh out of stewardship season, you would think that the Church would learn a valuable lesson about its own survival: you do not attract more people or their money by telling them how bankrupt the world has become.

Several years ago a public radio station put this obvious market truth into practice. The station mandated that classical music written in a minor key would no longer be added to its playlist. Apparently research had shown that the minor key does not make people feel happy, which translates into fewer listeners. The more cheery the music, the more plentiful the happy listeners.

Some churches have seen the light. They are skipping Advent altogether. Skipping over troubling texts about the coming judgment of our God, skipping over texts about how messed up our world has become, ridding themselves of anything that might interfere with the holiday cheer. It’s hard to feel that Silent Night serenity while singing “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” in the minor key.

Isaiah 64 is probably not on the reading list of these churches. And maybe it shouldn’t be on ours, either. What is the point of messing up this season of hope with a prayer of distress? “We sinned. We transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” Where is the good news in that? Not only have we failed, not only are we totally unable to do right, but God doesn’t seem to be interested in saving us anymore. “*Because you hid yourself we transgressed.*” “You have hidden your face from us.” “You have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.” God is silent, and we are out of hope, *completely* out of hope.

Is that really the message that the church ought to be speaking this time of year? It’s not as though there is a lack of bad news in our world. We’ve seen the carnage that human beings will do to each other—first graders cut down by one of our human kind. We’ve seen the same kind of gun violence right here—14 children under the age of 18 murdered just last year in Baltimore. Twelve the year before that. Fourteen the year before that. We do not need to be reminded that there are some things that are difficult for us to prevent, impossible for us to mend. In the suffering caused by disease and death, we do not need to be told that sometimes we have a hard time locating God’s whereabouts. In another year of violence, we do not need to be lectured on the hiddenness of God.

The church is supposed to be promising that good news is coming into the world. The church is supposed to be declaring that peace is coming to the nations. The church is supposed to be shouting the message of hope. Where are the promises of the child that will lead them, the wolf and the lamb lying down together, the heavens and nature that will sing? With all the expectations of good news promised to our world, why are we speaking this message of gloom and doom?

Isaiah's contemporaries might have been wondering the same thing. Israel was celebrating its own version of redemption. The exile was over. The Hebrew people were returning from the places where they had been scattered by their foreign oppressors. Once again they looked toward the hope of Jerusalem—the city on a hill. Their restoration had only just begun. This is the time for celebration, Isaiah. This is the time for joy. This is the time to announce that our despair has ended. This is the time to skip over the troubling texts about the coming judgment of God, skip over the texts about how messed up our world has become. This is the time to rid ourselves of anything that might interfere with the good will that's going around.

But Isaiah isn't ready to put on a happy face. He's heard this kind of happy theology before—a celebration of economies that fills the pockets of a few and leaves everyone else exhausted and in debt. He's seen this kind of optimism before. He's living in a city that once believed that its most favored nation status was intractable. He's lived among leaders who never had the courage to face the consequences of their nation's sin. Isaiah knows what it means to live in a nation that does not want to face an honest self-examination about drug wars that leave too many people dead, about segregation and poverty still tied to race, about a culture of violence that celebrates our destruction, about a gun and jail economy cloaked in the sheets of the Second Amendment and public safety. Isaiah knows what it means to live in a place where minor keys are not welcome on the public airwaves. He's weary of this kind of optimism that promises salvation in places where salvation cannot be found.

I think an increasing number of us are weary of it, too. Weary of the same empty promises that one more purchase is going to fill up our loneliness. Weary of the same old lies that one more war is going to make everything more secure. Weary of the same old false hopes that one more candidate, one more election, is going to fix what's broken with the world. Weary of the same old falsehood that one more jail is going to help our community. Weary of all the promises that salvation will be found in places where salvation can never be found.

As unpopular as Isaiah's message is this time of year, maybe there are a few who appreciate hearing the truth for a change: the world is messed up. *We* have failed our children. And if we trust only in ourselves, then we are *completely* out of hope.

Perhaps Isaiah knows that sometimes it takes reaching that kind of honest human ending to discover God's beginning. Maybe you have to hit the wall before you learn to trust a God who is coming to heal all of our brokenness. Maybe you have to run out of hope before you come to know what hope really is. When you face the darkness before you, only then are you able to see the joy of the light.

Because in Advent we are not simply getting ready for Jesus' birthday. We are not getting ready for our annual ritual of trying to be a little nicer to the in-laws. We are not simply getting ready for the routines of feeling a little more charitable, a little more generous, a little more pleasant. We are *longing* for the days when God's earthly kingdom will come, when there will be no more shootings inside schools or on our

own streets, when cancer will no longer leave an empty chair at the Christmas feast, when the mountains and hills will break forth into song, when no one will hurt or destroy, and the people will live in joy!

And that joyous day cannot come with another trip to the mall. That peace cannot come with another military campaign in the East. That safety is not going to come by building more jails while our schools are falling apart. It's not going to come if we purchase all the metal detectors in the world and put police officers in every school. That hope cannot come by putting on a happy face and singing happy songs. *That day will only come by the hand of a God* who does awesome deeds that we do not expect, who "came down" in the past and moved mountains for God's people.

We've seen those mountains moved before. Five years ago, I heard more people than I can count saying, "This nation will never elect a black man president." After the first election, more people said, "This nation will never allow a black man to be re-elected President." We forgot about the Lord who moves mountains for the people. I've read in history books about a governor, whose name I tend to forget, who once said, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." But someone else had a monument built to him down in Washington, and I didn't have to look up his name to remember whose dreams came closer to reality. A people once thought that women would never have the right to vote, that slavery would never end, that nations would always been ruled by Kings and Queens, and they all forgot about a God who tears open the heavens and comes down to move mountains for the children of God.

They forgot about the Christmas angels who all said the same thing to Mary and Joseph and Zechariah and the shepherds, "Do not fear because God is coming." They forgot about a child who was born to teach us that if we want to know where God lives, we might spend some time with the children. They forgot about God being willing to be broken on the cross to transform our brokenness into joy. They forgot about a God who defeated death to teach us not to fear. They forgot about a God who is coming to our world.

In the middle of a season of *false optimism*, the church is singing in the minor key and saying to the world that buying more stuff won't fill up the empty places, and *we aren't afraid to say it*; selling more guns won't fix bodies already broken, and *we are not afraid to speak it*; building more jails won't fix our city's abandonment of our children, and *we're not afraid to act on it*; singing more happy songs won't fill the void in our hearts and *we have the courage to admit it*. We are putting our hope in a God who has moved mountains in the past, who entered the world in the midst of Herod's killing of the children to assure us that though we might sometimes feel like clay, squashed and squeezed by this world, the potter is still at work! The Prince of Peace is still at work! The King of Kings is still at work! The Lord of Lord is still at work!

Isaiah begins his season of waiting for God's grace-filled intrusion with a fervent prayer: "Dear God, we are in the deep muddy. We have messed up this world in a terrible way. Our lives are not what we hoped they would be. Our relationships are not what we hoped they would be. Our faith is not what we hoped it would be. We are out of hope and we know it. But we're tired of living in this kind of brokenness. And you are the only one who can mend it. You are the only one who can give us our future."

You won't find that prayer in the shopping catalogues. You won't find it in a Congressional press release or a campaign's promises. You might not even find it in the church sometimes when we forget that our future is not in our budgets or in our programs or in our Sunday morning pomp. Praying this prayer sounds odd, especially this time of year. *But if you can't bear* to participate in all the self-deceit another year—*if your heart longs for healing* for wounds that run deeper than we can fix—*if you refuse to let go of the audacious vision* of the wolf and lamb lying down together, of no more children gunned down on our streets or anywhere else, the rich and the poor filled with what they need, then Isaiah's prayer might just be your prayer, too.