

“Clay”
Isaiah 64:1-9
Rev. Curtis Bablitz
December 3rd, 2023
1st Sunday of Advent

Sometimes you have to be careful what you ask for, because you just might get it.

In our reading from the book of Isaiah, God’s people are living in a world where evil is flourishing, where the villains are in control, where doing the right thing gets you nowhere and doing the wrong thing gets you wealth and success and power, and God’s people are fed up with it. They’re sick and tired of all their enemies having an easy time of things, they’re sick and tired of all the villains and the bullies living the good life while they’re stuck in the weeds, and they want God to do something about it. Hey, God! Get off that cloud and get down here and get to work already! You’re supposed to be running this world, and you’re doing a pretty lousy job of it, so break time is over, buddy, get back to work. Get down here and grab ahold of all those evil people and break them, smash them into teeny weeny little pieces, punish them for their crimes, make them pay, God, make them pay.

That’s what the people want. Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, that the mountains would shake, that the nations would tremble. Make this world burn, God. We know you can do it. You’ve done it before. We all know the stories, all the old tales of God showing up and blasting evil into smithereens, so let’s see it happen again. Come down, O God. That’s

what the people want. But you have to be careful what you ask for, because you just might get it.

See, the problem with asking God to come down and smash evil, to break the bad guys into all these little itty bitty pieces, is that we never see ourselves as the bad guys. The people want God to come down and destroy evil in the world, but then they stop for a second and realize, oh wait a minute, that includes us too. We're evil too. We are constant sinners, infected and impure; like autumn leaves, we wither and fall, our sins sweep us away. If God actually answers their prayer and comes down and destroys evil, he'll end up destroying the people as well.

So what are they going to do? Either God leaves them alone and allows evil to flourish, or God crushes evil and in so doing, crushes his people at the same time. Either way, the people are going to suffer, they're going to lose, they're going to die. Either way, they have no hope, no hope of things ever getting better, no hope of a better life or a better world or a future where they can prosper and grow strong, because either the evil out there or the evil in here is going to get them in the end, and that means there's no hope.

And then, right in the middle of this impossible dilemma, the prophet Isaiah has a new idea. And yet, O Lord, remember that we are clay. We are clay, and you are the potter. We are formed by your hand. Remember that we are clay.

A couple years ago, I went to a conference down in North Carolina with some of the staff from Camp Kintail, and on the last day, Kintail's assistant director, Matt and I had some free time, so we decided to join a pottery class they were offering. And they gave each of us this big lump of clay, and told us to take it in our hands, and close our eyes. And then, without looking, we were told to shape our lump of clay into a bowl, with our eyes closed the entire time. The leader guided us through step by step by step, first form the bowl and then shape the rim and smooth out the rough patches and so on and so on, and finally, after what felt like ages working on this lump of clay, they told us to open our eyes. And my bowl looked pretty good – a little rough in spots, but not too shabby. But Matt's bowl looked awful. I tried to reassure him it wasn't too bad, but honestly, it was bad – all lopsided and stretched, too thick in places, big holes in other places, just the saddest bowl you've ever seen.

And Matt said, well, forget this, and he took his bowl, and he just smushed it up into a big lump, and started over. And this time he kept his eyes open, and this time he managed to shape a reasonably decent-looking bowl. See, that's the great thing about clay. If you mess up, you can just smoosh it up and start over. If the thing you're making doesn't turn out the way it's supposed to, you can just reshape it, remold it, take it in your hands and keep working and shaping and changing it until it turns into the thing you wanted it to be all along. And of course, it helps if the one holding the clay knows what they're doing, and keeps their eyes open.

If the person molding the clay is a blindfolded amateur, it doesn't matter how many times you try to make something good, it'll probably come out awful each and every time, but if you give that same lump of clay to an expert, an artist, someone who pours all their skill, all their time, all their love into making that clay into something beautiful, well, then you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that no matter how long it takes, that clay will be transformed, that clay will become a work of art. Clay is what Hope looks like, because as long as something is made out of clay, there is still hope, there is always hope, because it isn't finished yet, it isn't formed yet, there's still time for it to be changed, as long as it's in the hands of someone who knows what they're doing, who knows how to turn a lump of clay into a work of art.

So when Isaiah reminds God that the people are clay, and God is the potter, he's providing a way forward for the people and for God. Yes, Isaiah still wants God to deal with the evil and brokenness and darkness in the world, and yes, Isaiah knows that in order for God to do that, the first problem to deal with is the evil and brokenness and darkness within the people themselves, but what Isaiah is asking God to do is to treat the people like clay – instead of smashing them, breaking them into tiny pieces, destroying them with fire and fury and anger and death, Isaiah asks God to take hold of the people again, and mold them into the people they were always meant to be.

Take hold of the people again with loving, powerful hands, and shape them and move them and push them and pull them and transform them into something new, a new kind of people, able to live in ways that bring life and light into the

darkness of this world. And if they fail, if they fall, if they again start living in ways that cause pain and death and darkness to spread, then they ask God to grab them and smooch them up, and start over, but never stop molding, never stop moving, never stop shaping that clay into what God wanted them to be all along. As long as the potter keeps working, there is always hope, because the work isn't finished yet, the people aren't finished yet, and they're held in the hands of someone who knows how to turn lumps of clay into works of art, sinners into saints, broken-hearted rebels into beloved children of God. God is still at work, molding the people to be exactly what God wants them to be, masterpieces, works of art created by the master's hands.

We live in a world that is just as corrupt and broken as Isaiah's world, a world just as full of evil and selfishness and darkness and death as Isaiah's world, and just like Isaiah, we want God to fix our world. We want God to tear open the heavens and come down and light this place on fire, burn down the abusers and the tyrants and the murderers and the terrorists, break them apart and bring in a world of justice and power and love, and yet if we are being honest, then we know that Isaiah's words of confession apply to us as well. If God was to come down and smash everything in this world that is evil and selfish and broken, the church would be the best place to start. God would have to start with us. And that means that just as much as Isaiah, we need to remember that we are clay.

We are clay, and God is our potter, and we need God's hands to make us into something new. We need to be molded and moved and manhandled into new creations, we need God to grab ahold of us and smooch us up and start over,

to create new life out of these tired old hearts of stubbornness and stone. And the good news that we have today is that when God came down, when God finally answered Isaiah's prayer and tore apart the heavens and came down to this earth, God didn't come to destroy. God didn't come in anger and judgment, with fury and wrath. God came in a manger.

God came as a child. God made himself clay. In Jesus Christ, God became part of us, one of us, God joined this creation as part of creation so that we can be molded and shaped in an entirely new way, so that we can be transformed from the inside out. And because of Jesus Christ, because of that baby in that manger, we will always have hope. We know that God isn't finished with us yet, Jesus Christ is still working on us and in us and through us to transform us and this world into the masterpiece he's always had planned. And today, here at this table, we get a reminder of the hope that God has given us. Today, here at this table, God takes hold of us and molds us a little bit more into the people we were created to be.

As we wait for the coming Christ child, as we wait for God to tear open the heavens and come down into our lives once again, may the power of God mold us and shape us more and more into people of hope, people who belong to Jesus Christ, now and forevermore. In the name of Jesus Christ - Amen.