

Sunday November 30th 2014

Readings

Isaiah 64:1-9

1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— **2** as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! **3** When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. **4** From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. **5** You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. **6** We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. **7** There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. **8** Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. **9** Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Psalm 80:1-7

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth **2** before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! **3** Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. **4** O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? **5** You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. **6** You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. **7** Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **4** I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, **5** for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— **6** just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— **7** so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. **8** He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. **9** God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13:24-27

24 "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, **25** and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. **26** Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds'

with great power and glory. **27** Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. **28** "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. **29** So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. **30** Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. **31** Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. **32** "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. **33** Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. **34** It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. **35** Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, **36** or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. **37** And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

What a time in which we live. We once again descend from our Thanksgiving highs, full of tryptophan naps and football highlights and of Black Friday steals. Even more so, we once again gather on the First Sunday of Advent, a day that inaugurates our communal anticipation of Christ's birth. In the babe Jesus, we know that creation is forever changed. We will soon sing about this together, hoping and praying and believing and yearning that, beginning with the manger in Bethlehem, the world is about to turn upside down.

And how badly do we need this turning. There are protests across our nation on the heels of a grand jury decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson on any charges after he shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager, in Ferguson, MO. We follow in the wake of a 12 year old Cleveland boy named Tamir Rice shot to death by a police officer because he was messing around with an Airsoft pistol, a toy less powerful than a BB gun, a toy that is available for purchase by anyone at every WalMart in the country.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!” How deeply do we need these words of Isaiah today! We don't know all the facts of what

happened with Michael Brown in Ferguson or with Tamir Rice in Cleveland, but what we do know is that our black sisters and brothers are hurting, are living in fear, are crying out for a world where liberty and justice for all is not only printed on our money but experienced equally by our citizens. Those are the cries of a people in need of God's advent in Christ, a people crying for the heavens to be torn open and for God's mercy and justice to come equally.

Our world is still broken across the lines of race, though most of us want to believe otherwise. For our predominantly white church in our predominantly white community with our completely white pastor, we have been put face to face with the *de facto* segregation prevalent within our communities. And

this isn't just about where we live. A 2013 Public Religion Resource Institute survey found that 75% of white people in our country have "entirely white social networks without any minority presence." In other words, three quarters of white people have no significant interpersonal relationships with persons of color. So, as discussions arise about the role of race within our community, most white people cannot comprehend the feelings or real life experiences of blacks because, well, too many of us really don't know anyone who isn't white.

I can imagine some of the questions in your minds at this point. "Pastor, is Advent really the time to talk about this?" "Pastor, what does race have to do with our preparations for Christmas?"

Friends, we must talk about this, because the world is broken and to be faithful to the Gospel we must be honest about our brokenness. Advent is not just a season of singing carols and decking halls, but a season born out of a broken world in desperate need of a savior to save us from our brokenness, to redeem us from our sin, to reconcile us not only to God but to one another. So, yes, we need to talk about this.

And we must remember that Advent is not only the time where prepare for the Christmas season, but it is the time of anticipation of the Christmas miracle, God becoming human, God bringing the fullness of heaven to earth. It is a time to talk about the divisions that still exist between us because during advent we

prepare for God to collapse the divide between divinity and humanity. It is surely the time to speak about reconciliation because God's incarnation in Jesus – that God chose to collapse the divisions between heaven and earth – is a witness to the kind of life together God desires for all creation. Rather than condemn humanity for all our faults and failures, rather than leave us to our systematic oppressions and personal prejudices, God chooses to break apart the heavens in order to bring salvation to earth. To make things right, God first decides to cross the barriers of space and time, of race and culture, and inhabit our space and time, take on our races and cultures, in order to redeem all of humanity.

My grandmother Jeanette is one of my most favorite people that has ever lived. She was an incredible blessing to our family for her ninety-eight years on earth. And, if I'm honest with myself, she was also caught up in the throws of cultural racism. Now, she wasn't a Klan member and didn't overtly treat minorities differently. You see, my uncle adopted two girls from Korea long before I was born, and let me tell you, Grandma loved Julie and Jenny without exception, as equally as any of her biological grandchildren. But when Jenny started dating a black guy named Jason – a business owner, professional boxer, and now father of her wonderful child Jordan – Grandma had a very difficult time with this. Her usually chipper attitude was definitely

affected, and she frequently expressed her displeasure. At a watershed moment for grandma Jeanette, Jenny finally said, "Grandma, I'm not white either!" I'm not white either.

This was a revelatory moment for a number of reasons. One key aspect was that Grandma, with people she knew and loved, had somehow kicked the prejudice she carried as she looked at Julie and Jennie. The boundaries had been broken. But she couldn't see Jason that way because, to Grandma, Jason was an outsider. We are all, at times, caught up in this kind of prejudice, defining people as insiders and outsiders, refusing communion rather than developing community.

But the story of the incarnation is that God refuses to allow these social divisions to prevent the coming of God's kingdom. God refuses to let our boundaries limit the scope of God's grace. God spans a cosmic divide and becomes Jesus, the Messiah of Israel. And yet, this babe in a manger quickly becomes racial reconciler who brings the same good news to Samaritans as well as Jews. This babe in a manger quickly becomes the racial reconciler who admits the integrity of gentiles. To God, there are no outsiders. There are none who can't be welcomed into the Kingdom of God. In the words of Isaiah's prayer to God, "Remember: We are all your people."

We are *all* God's people. That kind of message, that kind of fairness and equality, turns the world

upside down. We are all God's people, and that means that God intends to tear apart the prejudices that lie latent within our culture just as God tore open the heavens to bring divinity into this earthly life. We are all God's people, and that means the advantages and disadvantages wrought by race, socio-economic status, sexual orientation will all be leveled by the child in Bethlehem, that we all might equally commune with God. God is about crossing boundaries, about breaking barriers – even the separations of heaven and earth – so that we might embrace our common identities as people of God.

One of the best stories I heard this week about Ferguson is about a hug. There is an incredible yet understandable amount distrust currently between

Ferguson protestors and the law enforcement authorities. But on Wednesday night, Joshua Williams, a black protestor, walked across the picket line and hugged Lt. Jerry Lohr, a white police officer. You see, Joshua and Jerry had met previously on Florissant Road during other protests. Joshua was moved because Jerry approached protestors without riot gear. Rather than carry a weapon in his hand, Jerry carried his knit cap. In this gesture, Joshua saw hope for progress, and they struck up a relationship. One still protests, the other still serves as a police officer, but they found a way to break the boundaries and embrace as brothers.

The hopefulness of Advent lies within this type of embrace. Rather than seeing one another as

enemies, rather than remaining divided by tragedy and separated by sin, Joshua and Jerry found brotherhood in an embrace that broke boundaries.

Advent is the season of breaking boundaries because while we remained bound by our frailty, God broke the boundary of heaven and came to earth. God brought salvation to all humanity through a backwater Bethlehem stable, to turn the world upside down, to break the boundaries that divide us.

We, then, cannot remain complacent with the divisions that still plague our world. We must validate the integrity of all people, black and white, protestor and police. Rather than promote the violence between us, we must hope and pray and work toward a world that sees salvation in Bethlehem's

babe, the one whose power is fully seen in the self-sacrifice of a cross. Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, O Lord. We need you to save us from our hatred, from our prejudice, from ourselves. Amen.