

Isaiah – Advent – OAPC
 (or, “Can We Learn From Difficult
 Passages in the Bible?”)
 Isaiah 64:1-9
 First Sunday of Advent
 November 30, 2008
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA
 James T. Richardson

[NOTE: The Scripture passage is read later inside the sermon.]

If you are as I am, the tragedy of the killings in Mumbai, India, this past week has darkened my soul. That city of 18 million souls has been shaken by the murders committed by some group of terrorists. It immediately brought back to my own mind the killings that occurred here in our United States on September 11, 2001.

Among many other things, September 11th has made us Christians more aware of the religion of Islam. We had forgotten that Abraham’s first born son by Hagar was **Ishmael** whose Muslim descendants today form the second largest religious group in the world. Christians find our heritage through Abraham’s second born son by Sarah in the person of **Isaac**, father of Jacob whose name was changed to Israel.

Muslims call God by the name of *Allah* whereas **Jews and Christians** call that same God by the name of *Yahweh*, which means, of course, that Franklin Graham was incorrect in saying that Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God! Of course we do; but we have Mohammed and Jesus to thank for giving us different understandings of who God is and how God works! *Are you with me on this?*

One of the things that we must keep in mind as we study the Old Testament [The Hebrew Bible] is that our forebears, the Jews, were looking forward to the time when their God, YAHWEH, was going to send his Messiah, his Anointed One, his Christ. As Christians, you and I confess that Jesus of Nazareth is that Christ, the Messiah of God, the Anointed One of God.

That is the primary thing which separates us Christians from our Jewish neighbors. We both believe in the same God, who is called YAHWEH, but we Christians believe that the Messiah has already come in Jesus of Nazareth, whereas the Jews are still waiting for God to send the Messiah. *Are you with me on this?*

And as we move into the Season of Christmas, we should remember that the word “*Christmas*” stands for “*Christ’s Mass*” coming out of Roman Catholic terminology, whereas in Presbyterian terminology, “*Christ’s Mass*” simply stands for “*our 11:00 p.m. worship service*” on Christmas Eve honoring the birthday of Christ and during which we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Incidentally, I hope that YOU are planning to be here for that service!

Christmas began as a church festival celebrating the birthday of the Messiah, and at first, it was celebrated along with the baptism of Jesus on the day of Epiphany, 12 days after Christmas. In other words, the Christmas festival lasted about two weeks. That is why some of your Christian neighbors (probably members of The Orthodox Church) may celebrate Christmas for more than one day!

However, in the 4th Century when the **Council at Nicea** struggled with the doctrine of the Christ--who He was and how He got here---they wrote **the Nicene Creed** which we will use in just a few minutes. Because of the writing of the Nicene Creed in **325 A.D.**, the birthday of Jesus suddenly became very important in the church year as a way of saying that **Jesus was really human and not some phantom!** His mother **Mary** was a real, live human being!

The word “**Advent**” means “*coming*” or “*arrival*,” and the season of Advent is the time in the church year when we look forward to the birthday of the Messiah.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and the passage of scripture that is in the lectionary for today comes from The Book of Isaiah. Isaiah is the prophet whom George Handel quoted and whose words we often hear read and sung during the Christmas Season.

“For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”
[Isaiah 9:6; RSV]

Thank God for George Handel!

Isaiah was one of the Old Testament writers who kept repeating again and again to the children of Israel:

Remember: God is going to send his Anointed One, his Messiah!
Remember: God is going to send his Anointed One, his Messiah!

Allow me to set the stage for today’s passage from the prophet Isaiah.

God called Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. In the Genesis stories, we learn how the Children of Israel wound up in Egypt through famine and through Joseph. The Hebrews became slaves, and God led Moses to confront Pharaoh and free his people.

The Hebrews wandered for forty years in the desert wilderness. They entered the promised land under Joshua’s command. They became a settled nation with King Saul and King David and King Solomon as leaders.

The people forgot Yahweh God.

The Kingdom split into two parts: the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah.

It was during the turbulent period about **800 years before Jesus** surrounding the split between the two kingdoms that prophets such as **Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah** appear on the scene.

This was the era of history’s first great imperialistic wars with the poles of international power being on **the Euphrates River** to *the east* [in what is now present-day Iraq] and **the Nile River** [in Egypt] to *the west*. **HOWEVER**, the great days of the nation Egypt fast drew to a close, and the nation of **Assyria** and the nation of **Babylonia** found **Palestine** to be a troublesome spot on the caravan route to **Egypt**.

So, because Palestine was the bridge between the great cultures of the world, it was extremely important that there be peace and stability in Palestine. When it was not peaceful, **the northern kingdom of Israel** and **the southern kingdom of Judah** were first *warned* and then they were *laid waste*, with every sizeable town utterly destroyed, most of the inhabitants killed, and the leaders carried off into exile and slavery in a foreign land.

This time of warning from foreign nations was the era of the prophets 800 years before Jesus, and these were the events about which Amos and Hosea and Jeremiah and Isaiah were prophesying. It was “*International Power Politics*” such as is going on right now over in the Middle East.

Now, it may be that some of you are thinking: “What does this have to do with us today in 21st century Rock Hill, South Carolina? What good does it do to learn about the God of history and how God was confessed and worshiped in the past?”

The best answer is that of JOHN CALVIN, our Presbyterian fore-father in the faith. John Calvin spoke of **the Bible** as being the “**spectacles**” or *the eye glasses of our faith* which enable us to see and through – which bring things into focus in the here and now. Without these spectacles of the Holy Scriptures (how God has acted in past history), everything going on right now would be totally confused.

You should understand that often in most sermons or comments upon the Bible by this preacher, the emphasis is upon individual believers:

How can Christ change MY life?
What does Christian faith have to do with MY ethical choices?
How does the Holy Spirit direct MY life?

In thinking of the Christmas story of the birth in the stable, most often the picture is presented with YOU as an individual standing in the crowd looking on. When St. John’s United Methodist Church here in Rock Hill presents its “**Return to Bethlehem**” which I encourage you to attend, you will find yourself as an individual standing in the crowd looking-on.

Or, if the preacher enlarges the picture at all, it is the Christian Church that is standing in faith looking at the stable scene of the birth of Jesus.

But the Bible says [most clearly in the Gospel of John]: “**For God so loved the WORLD the He gave His only Son.....**”

Any newspaper or magazine which you care to pick up today will put it to you pretty clearly: IN MUMBAI, INDIA, terrorists are attacking democracy!

IN AFGHANISTAN the United States and the Northern Alliance are trying to get the Taliban in a strangle-hold.

IN THE MIDDLE EAST there is continuing hostility and bloodshed between Israel and Palestinian Arabs.

IN EASTERN EUROPE the world waits to see if that area of the world can get over the terrible “ethnic cleansings” that have occurred.

IN AFRICA AND IN ASIA various nations seems to be sitting on a powder keg simply waiting for some extremist to throw a match.

IN SOUTH AMERICA, Russia is trying to influence Venezuela.

IN THE UNITED STATES we are still hurting and “licking our wounds” from what terrorists have done to us while also it seems as if our economy is about to come apart on us.

We live in a time in history when it is literally possible to completely destroy the world. Isolationism as a political theory is a completely dead issue. When the United States does anything which affects us as a nation, it automatically affects the rest of the world.

Take for example: the current tragedy of our economic instability, or our misuse of oil, or our agricultural harvest, or our automobile industry, or our fighting in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The passage of scripture in Isaiah which we have before us today, written 800 years before Jesus and still relevant 2100 years after Jesus, is a passage in which the prophet is speaking to God. Listen:

ISAIAH 64:1-9 (NRSV)

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 you're 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 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.

There are two things about today's passage in Isaiah which pertain to Advent, and these two things are very difficult for us in Oakland Avenue PCUSA in 2008 to understand.

DIFFICULTY #1

THE FIRST DIFFICULT THING about this passage is that IT IS A **BESEECHING**.

The word “beseeching” is a word of the past. It is a word like “smooch.” It is one of those words which we do not use any more. Synonyms for the word “beseech” are: pray-----petition-----supplicate-----entreat-----ask-----plead.

To “beseech” someone is as much a command as it is a pleading. It is a command in the sense of expecting results to your request. Isaiah is beseeching God, imploring God, begging God, commanding God – for the verb Isaiah uses is an **imperative** verb:

*“(You) **Return for the sake of your servants...**” (63:17)*

*“(You) **tear open the heavens and come down...**” (64:1)*

Let me run something past you for your mulling over this next week; I want to know if you think that I am missing my mark on this.

- (1) Most of us neither want to know nor even know how to beseech God.
- (2) Most of us did not come to worship this morning anticipating meeting God.
- (3) Most of us do not expect to see Jesus in the person sitting on the pew with us.

And what about our OAPC inactive members who do not ever come to worship on Sundays? Do you feel at all guilty that you have not sought out an inactive member with the effort to refresh their faith in God?

We are talking COMMITMENT now!

Would you think it unfair of this preacher to say that many of us come to church out of convenience rather than out of commitment? Why, on a given Sunday, do we have vacant seats here in our Sanctuary which can seat 526 people when we have 900 members?

We are talking COMMITMENT now!

Would you think it unfair of this preacher to say that the level of financial giving to OAPC, even in these troubling economic times, is a lack of commitment to the church and a lack of faith in God? Simply considering **visual examples** of how God has richly blessed us financially, the reported family unit promises of financial support to OAPC in 2009 indicate that you and I have **miscounted** our blessings from God!

So, how can we **beseech** God for anything – much less **plead** for excitement and joy in the coming of the Christ Child at Christmas? Do you think that it is true that many of us sit back and **DARE** God to disturb us?

DIFFICULTY #2

THE SECOND DIFFICULT THING ABOUT THIS ISAIAH PASSAGE is that it is a **CONFESSION**. Listen:

“.....in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? 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. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you.....” [Isaiah 64:5b-7a; NRSV]

In Rock Hill, South Carolina, in 2008, confession of sin is a difficult thought for most of us because most of us do not think that we have anything to confess!

Do you think that is true?

The irony of Rock Hill in 2008 is that **consciously** we rationalize ourselves out of having a conscience, while **unconsciously** we are so guilty about our selfishness that sometimes our behavior is such that we cannot understand ourselves!

Do you think that is true?

THE TWO DIFFICULTIES IN THIS ISAIAH PASSAGE ARE THAT IT IS A BESEECHING AND IT IS A CONFESSING.

And you and I do not do either very well! Can we learn from difficult passages in the Bible, including this passage of beseeching and confessing in Isaiah?

Allow me to let you in on a little secret. There is Good News in this passage and you can find it in verses 8 and 9:

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.*

Do you see what Isaiah was saying in the midst of the instability and bloodshed of the international politics of his day?

Do you understand how the Bible and the prophets of the Old Testament are as relevant in the 21st century as in the 8th century before Jesus?

CRISIS is crisis...whether it is in terms of nations or in terms of individuals.

CRISIS is a time of darkness; the Psalmist speaks of crisis in terms of the valley of the shadow of death.

CRISIS is a time when all seems lost.

CRISIS is a time when things do not look good – whether it involves Israel in the 8th century or Israel in the 21st century; whether it involves the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Northern Alliance;

whether it deals with Wall Street or Mumbai, India; whether it deals with a tragic accident or an illness or a disease; whether it involves the loss of a loved one through death or through geographical separation or through emotional rejection.

CRISIS IS CRISIS! It is a time of DARKNESS.

And there is GOOD NEWS in that darkness:

YOU AND I BELONG TO GOD!

Do you believe it?

Then, that is all I have to say!