

# **Let Earth Receive Her King: HOPE**

*Isaiah 64:1-9*

1. Hopeless situations lead to lament.

2. Lament leads to confession.

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## Let Earth Receive Her King<sup>1</sup>: Hope

*Isaiah 64:1-9*

I'm sure you would agree with the universal sentiment that 2020 can't get over soon enough; there have been so many bad things that have happened in this year.

Let's be honest: we've got Covid fatigue, Zoom fatigue, election fatigue, politics fatigue, conspiracy theory fatigue, social upheaval fatigue. In all honesty, I am exhausted, and in many ways I can relate to the text today; I think you will too. If you don't already have it, open to Isaiah 64 in your Bible.

When everything is lost—when homes and lives are destroyed by war or natural disaster, when positive COVID counts keep rising, when there is seemingly no way out—we call it a hopeless situation. That's where the passage that Will Koenig read lands us—right in the middle of a hopeless situation. After decades of exile in Babylon, the Judeans are free to return to their homeland, only to find it destroyed and barren. What they thought would be a joyous homecoming has ended in feelings of despair. They told the stories of this place to their children and their grandchildren, only to return to a place that was unrecognizable.

And in their despair, they feel this incredible distance from God. They question whether God is working on their behalf—if God is listening at all. In the midst of this great sorrow, in the midst of this despair, they raise up a great lament to God: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!" The imagery here gives a great sense of longing for God to be revealed, for God to intervene, for God to interject some light into the midst of this darkness, for God to bring about some kind of hope into a seemingly hopeless situation. At least we're not as bad off as the Judeans were, but we *can* relate to a situation that just seems to keep getting worse. And like all the stories in the Bible, there are life lessons that we can learn and apply to our lives today. So let's see how they dealt with it through the account of the prophet Isaiah. First from Isaiah 64, we see that...

### **1. Hopeless *situations* lead to *lament*.**

Because of their hopeless situation, the Judeans cried out in lament to God. They wonder out loud where God is; they think they've been abandoned by God, and they want to know why God would leave them this way.

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In their lament they beg God to draw near. In the words of theologians, they are longing for a *theophany* – they long for a physical manifestation of God’s presence and power – like he had done so many times in their past. But God was not behaving like he was supposed to.

The language “come down” in verse one and “make known” in verse two point to the reality that they long for a great and visible intercession from God, like he had done in the distant past.

They recall the ways God has interceded in the past and wonder where God is this time. These people have heard their entire lives the miraculous stories surrounding Abraham and Moses, how God established their nation, freed the people from slavery in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea. They long to see that again, and they wonder why God isn’t doing it. In fact, the phrases “come down” and “mountains trembled” are repeated in verse one and verse three, in order to show how great God was – *back then*.

I think we can relate to this lament. Just think how great it would be if God were to deal with the virus and with the political divisiveness and with the social unrest! Just think how great it would be if Jesus came back! But he hasn’t, and it feels like he won’t appear anytime soon. Oh that God would rip open the heavens and get down here! We lament because the circumstances feel like they are going to overwhelm us. Don’t misunderstand this: Lament is different than whining, or whimpering, or complaining. Lament is not a bad thing. The Psalms are filled with laments; lament is a legitimate means of expression.

Look again at verse four. It’s the verse about no one ever hearing about a God like ours. That verse is interesting because it has kind of a double message: one message is that, for the Judeans at that time, it appears that there never has been a god like what’s described *because he’s nowhere in sight*. No one has seen one because he doesn’t seem to exist. It’s more sarcasm than declaration. The other meaning is that it admits that there has *never been and never will be* another God like ours – a God who acts on behalf of his faithful people who trust and wait for him. And as they think about that second meaning, they begin to realize that they have not been faithful people and they have not, and are not, doing a very good job of waiting and trusting God.

So their...

## **2. Lament leads to confession.**

The lament of the Judeans led them to confession. As they beg God to draw close and reveal His power, they realize that they have not drawn close to Him. The lament shifts to confession: they have continued to sin, and no one calls on the Lord’s name anymore. No one seeks God.

There is some true honesty happening in this lament-turned-confession. They believe their sin has caused God to turn away from them. In fact, there is a kind of cycle going on here; their sin brought on God’s anger, and when God was angry with

them and withdrew from them, they responded by sinning even more, which brought on a greater distance between them and God...and their condition in sin and distance from God spiraled further and further. The good thing is that they realize what they have been doing.

In light of their sin, they realize that any and all of their attempts at righteousness or good works are nothing more than filthy rags.

Do you understand the term for “filthy rags”? Have you heard the literal translation for that phrase? Oh great, that means I need to explain it. The term describes a menstrual cloth.

That’s an interesting description. During that time of the month the woman was considered ritually unclean; which meant the person could not go into the sanctuary or offer sacrifices while this was happening. She wasn’t unclean because the condition itself was sinful, but because it demonstrated the result of sin in humanity that was yet another reason that we needed to offer sacrifices and go through the process of being made ritually clean at least very month! So “filthy rags” was meant to show that even the most righteous thing we do is not going to be good enough; we still needed regular ritual cleansing. Make sense? How’d I do? Parents, I’ll let you explain that to your kids. Or better yet, ask Pastor Casey to explain it to your kids!

So the Judeans fully understand that they are unclean and have walked away from and forsaken God. And they recognize that it involves all of them; this is a *communal confession*. It is not about individual sin. Remember that the Israelites went into exile because of their repeated sinfulness. But many of these individuals weren’t even born yet when the nation of Israel entered exile—which means this confession is not about individual acts but about who they are and have historically been as a community of people. So this is about *corporate sin*—the ways that they as a society, as a people, have forsaken God; the ways they have been disobedient to whom God has called them to be.

So the question is, whom has God called them to be? They were called by God through Abraham to be a hospitable people who love God and love their neighbors. That’s what they were *supposed* to be. But over and over again, they have repeatedly lived in opposition to the people they were called to be. (This is a cycle and a theme that is repeated throughout the Old Testament. That’s why Jesus arrived; to break us out of that cycle and empower us to be what he has called his people to be: a hospitable people who love God and their neighbors.)

But they recognize and confess that, as a people, they are continuing to draw away from God. We can see the idea of collective sin in the language of their confession: “we continued to sin” in verse 5; “all of us” in verse 6; “no one” in verse 7. And this act of confession shows a shift in their thinking. God is not to blame for their present circumstances; *they* have a responsibility to own the choices and actions that have gotten them into their current situation. So do we. You personally, individually, may not have sinned, but we as a nation *have sinned and are sinning*, so we are all guilty and must confess for all of us.

But notice that by confessing, it means that even in their desperation, they trust that God is listening to them.

That's why lament is not just whining or complaining or hopeless grief. Lament is the act of crying out to God about circumstances, while at the same time being willing to take responsibility for our own contributions to those circumstances. Confession and lament often go hand in hand.

Confession is both a plea for forgiveness and for relationship.

They realized that they had hurt and severed their relationship with God. They had abandoned their job of waiting for Christ's first advent or arrival, which meant they weren't being obedient to God, they stopped trusting that he will send his Messiah, and they stopped seeking him and staying close to him.

So let me just interject here with a moment for personal application: How are you doing as you wait for Christ's second advent? How are we as a people doing as we wait for Christ's second Advent? How are we doing at being obedient to God, trusting that the Messiah will return, and are we seeking God and staying close to him? Have we been the people God called us to be? Maybe we have not done well, either...

In both lament and confession, they, and we, long for something to be restored and renewed. Let me repeat: in both lament and confession, they, and we, long for something to be restored and renewed. That's what we will do at our Comfort and Joy service; we will lament, and even confess, that we long for things to be restored and renewed. You might think you don't need to attend because you haven't lost a loved one this year. But the truth is that if you have been alive during 2020, you qualify. We need to come together to lament and confess that we need things to be restored and renewed. I hope you can join us either in person or live online this Wednesday at 7pm Pacific Time.

But as they lament and confess, the reality of the situation sinks in and they are...

### **3. Left without words.**

They reach a point where there's nothing left to say.

There is a gap in the text between verses 7 and 8. It seems they have expressed so much despair that they have nothing left to say. All that's left is complete and utter hopelessness.

In the class I'm teaching on Sunday mornings, last week we talked about how prayer is like a baby's cry. Before we had kids, Shelly and I would hear a baby cry, and all their crying sounded the same. It was annoying. But when we had kids of our own, suddenly we could tell the difference. We'd hear one of our baby boys crying, and Shelly would know right away if it was an angry cry or a hungry cry or a "I want someone to pay attention to me" cry. Listen: when we are left without words and all we can do is cry, God hears every cry, and he understands what every wordless cry is about. God hears and knows our lament.

As they begin to realize that God hears them...

#### **4. Hope *glimmers* on the *horizon*.**

You can see in that passage that glimmers of hope eventually appear.

After the gap between verses 7 and 8, the entire tone of the text changes. It's like a switch is flipped between verse 7 and verse 8. God is now "Father" and "potter." The people are now "the clay" and "the work of your hand."

Their circumstances haven't changed from verse 7 to verse 8. They are still looking at a desolate place to call home. They still face insurmountable odds.

But what shifts is their view of their relationship with God in the midst of this hopeless situation.

There is hope—not because of the good the people have done. Their confession shows they have lacked good and right actions.

There is hope—not because of their circumstances. Their homeland still lies in ruin. They have had no triumphal homecoming. They still have nowhere to live.

Yet there is hope—because of who God is.

God is their Father. This is about relationship.

This is a confession by someone who, after wandering for a long time away from God in their sin, they finally come home. They are saying, "In spite of everything that has happened, you are Father. There is nothing that can change that." It's very much like the realization that the prodigal son came to when he realized he could go to his father's home and at least be a servant. He thought he had sinned so bad that he could no longer be a son. But he knew the heart of his father, and he'd at least be treated kindly. But on his return home, to his surprise, he finds that the father welcomes him back fully as a son. So in this passage, they express their confidence in a God who is a father and who loves them in spite of their failings.

Then they say that God is the Potter. God is at work molding them, actively moving in ways that make God's people look more like God.

Which means that they are God's people. After the lament and the confession, the people remember their identity. Regardless of whether they have a home, they remain the people of God.

Which means finally that...

#### **5. There is *hope* for *us*.**

There is hope for us too, even in the midst of our hopeless situations.

On this first Sunday of Advent, many of us are also walking through or into seemingly hopeless situations.

You've experienced what it's like to have to spend Thanksgiving without being able to gather with your entire family, and you realize that it's likely that these current restrictions will extend through Christmas and the New Year. You are not very excited about heading into a Christmas like that.

Or, despite the pandemic, maybe as you look ahead at spending time with family, you have a deep apprehension. Despite your longing for a picture-perfect holiday, your family is tattered by addiction, unhealthy relationships, or unspoken pain.

Some of us walk toward the holiday season knowing we won't have a loved one with us. What is supposed to be a joyous occasion has become one of distress and heartache, because you've had a loved one die in the last year, or that you have a loved one in the hospital or in an elder care facility and you can't see them because of the virus.

Others of us were looking forward to a great new year, but because of the financial strain from all the shut downs, you realize you will only be faced financial hardship or illness, and we wonder how we will make it.

So reality sinks in about our circumstances, and God feels distant in the midst of hopeless situations.

Despair has a way of robbing us of joy. We wonder where God is in the midst of this pain. We look longingly at where God has worked in the past and ask whether God is still close to us now.

Confession is an important part of Advent. Not all of our hopeless situations are caused by our own choices, our own sins. Sometimes they are caused by the sins and choices of others. Yet we know there are places we need to confess.

Sometimes we have participated in collective action that has wronged others. Other times we might need to confess our attitudes or thoughts in response to others.

We don't always think of Advent as a time of confession, but confession often leads us to look at things with new eyes. Because through our lament and our confession, in the midst of our desperation, we are led to remember who God is and who we are. Our circumstances this Advent might not change. All of those hopeless situations we are facing might still be facing us, even as Christmas comes.

But God is still our Father, and he is still the Potter. God desires relationship with us, in spite of what we've done and despite our circumstances. God welcomes you as his son or daughter, and he can shape your life into something useful and beautiful. God also desires to make us holy, in spite of what we've done and despite our circumstances.

We are still God's people. We are not forsaken by God, and as God's beloved people, we have hope that God is still doing a new thing in us.

The true hope for the world is still a long time coming from the perspective of our text this morning; they were still 700 years away from Christ's first Advent. We have the honor of seeing more deeply into the story; we read it from this side of the first Christmas. We know how it will turn out for the Israelites—but that doesn't mean

we don't face our own hopeless situations today because we don't know how our own stories are going to go. We may yet have years ahead of us of questioning the presence of God or of who we are in the world.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a great Christmas poem, in which he said, "And in despair I bowed my head; there is no peace on earth, I said. For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, goodwill to men." We can feel that despair keenly in our text today, but *we* often feel it so keenly in our lives as well.

And yet, there is hope. There is hope! Not because everything is going to work out the way we think it should. There is hope! Not because everything is going to be wrapped up with a neat bow by Christmas morning. There is hope because God still hears us cry out, just like God heard God's children cry out hundreds of years ago, thousands of years ago. There is hope because God is a good Father who loves us. There is hope because we are still God's people.

So even today—weeks before Christmas, when we will celebrate the Light of the world coming, when the earth will rejoice over the birth of Christ—in the midst of our despair today, we still cling to hope because we are still the beloved children of God.

*Pray*