

11.30.08 The God We Are Waiting For: Is a God of Power Isaiah 64:1-9

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Waiting is not something that comes easily to many people, some of us hate waiting. Yet waiting is part of life and something we do all the time. In her book *Seven Sacred Pauses*, Macrina Wiederkehr writes about waiting (page 34):

“We wait for the diagnosis after a series of medical tests, whether for ourselves or for a family member or friend. We wait for news after the surgery of a loved one. We wait for our children, and sometimes for our parents, to come home from war. We wait to hear if we got the job we applied for, or if our test scores will make it possible for us to attend the university of our choice. We wait for reconciliation and forgiveness. We wait for death. Most of us do not like to wait. There is anxiety in waiting – whether we are waiting in a supermarket line, in the doctor’s office, the I.R.S. office, at the bank, in a restaurant, at the stoplight, or any of the hundreds of places we have to wait each week. Waiting is not high on our list of priorities.” But, “There is the **joyful waiting** for someone dear to come for a visit, or the waiting for an important event such as a marriage or the birth of a child.”

The season of advent is a time of waiting, waiting for God to act, waiting for the seed of God’s Spirit to sprout and grow further in our lives, waiting with hope to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus, who reminds us of God’s power, comfort, good news, peace, and joy. This is the God we are waiting for in these weeks. Listen to God’s Word through the prophet Isaiah:

“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.**”

Isaiah 64 is written to people who have been waiting for God to act; who feel like God is absent in the midst of the heart ache, hardship, financial insecurity, grief and desolation of their daily lives. More than 500 years before the birth of Jesus, the Jewish captives who had lived in Babylon for 50 fifty years waiting and wondering if they would ever be allowed to return to the land of their ancestors finally were given permission to return home by Cyrus the Persian. Their excitement about returning home was short lived because they returned to a Jerusalem that was in ruins, the magnificent Temple built by King Solomon lay in a pile of rubble, the houses of their youth were torn down - a glorious city was no more. The question comes to their minds: where is God in the midst of all this? Where is God when we are in trouble? Sure we've heard about what God's done in the past, but God if we ever needed you before we need you now and we're just not seeing or hearing you. They were wondering if there was any hope for things getting better.

Across 2,500 years and an ocean of changes, many people today feel that way as we begin the season of advent and Christmas. For many, it doesn't feel like a time to celebrate. Financially Americans are facing the most challenging times in perhaps 80 years. We should not forget we are still much better off than our sisters and brothers in so many places around the world like Somalia, the Congo, the Sudan, or Haiti. The world remains a violent place as we were reminded this week with the tragedy that unfolded in Mumbai, India in which hundreds of innocent civilians and numerous brave security and police officers were killed or wounded by terrorists who have no respect for human life.

Many of us celebrated Thanksgiving this past week and had a nice time catching up with loved ones, eating and laughing together. For some of us, though, the holiday is painful because our family is stressful to be with or coming apart or has come apart so the holidays mean headaches of sharing time with different family members in different

places or it can be a heart rending reminder of what was but is no longer because of the loss of a relationship or a loved one.

And so like the Jewish people returning from one hardship to face another, we cry out to God for God to intervene, for God **to act**, for God to do what we cannot do, and for God to do it despite our sinfulness, failure, disobedience, and weakness. Isaiah pleads on behalf of the people for God to do awesome deeds we don't expect.

We live in a similar time in which we would like to see God act in powerful, clear, and unmistakable ways – just as there is no mistaking an earthquake, a fire, or boiling water. In our day there is economic hardship, our nation is engaged in two wars, millions are in need, violence and terrorism are part of life, we see the brutality that is done to women and children around the world, the scourge of HIV/AIDS. On a smaller scale this week, what does it say about people that they would trample a worker to death at Walmart so they can buy things on sale, men shooting each other dead in a Toys R US, it is ridiculous - enough is enough! Like Isaiah we feel it is high time for God to act decisively – **“Tear open the heavens and come down.”** There is a part of us that finds this very appealing, we want God to come down and kick some... to straighten some things out –Yet, even in calling for the Almighty to reaffirm God's power over creation and history, the idea of what would happen if a holy God were to tear open the heavens and come down in a dramatic way, is a little unnerving. Verse 4 says, **“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.”** How hard is it for us to wait for God in the midst of adversity? The old proverb, *“Good things come to those who wait,”* doesn't seem to carry much weight any more.

Shortly after starting her perfume business, Estee Lauder realized she had to persuade a cosmetics buyer to place her products in many stores throughout the country. At 9:00 a.m., Lauder was in the offices of the American Merchandising Corporation, waiting to see Marie Weston, the cosmetics buyer. Since Lauder had no appointment, she was advised to come back another day.

“I don't mind waiting,” said Lauder, *“I'll wait until she has a few free moments.”*

Salespeople came and went. At lunchtime, the receptionist said Weston's schedule was so full that getting to see her was impossible. Again, Lauder was told to come back later. *“I'll wait longer,”* she persisted. Hours passed.

At 5:15 p.m. Marie Weston came out of her office. She looked at Estee Lauder in disbelief, then admiration, and said, *“Well, do come in. Such patience must be*

rewarded.” Weston was impressed with Lauder’s cosmetics, but there was no room in any of the stores. Come back later, she was encouraged. Of course, Estee did. Eventually, Weston found room in several stores. Business began to boom. Since then the Estee Lauder name has become fairly well known in the world of cosmetics.¹

Isaiah says God meets those who gladly do right and remember God and God’s ways. Unfortunately, that doesn’t necessarily describe the people in his time or our own. Compared to what God desires of us, the prophet says we are all unclean even our best deeds are like filthy rags. The renewal of hope is based on the people’s recommitment through repentance to obedience. As we wait for God we can open ourselves through repentance to God’s grace, forgiveness, and healing. So the prophet leads the people in a confession of sin in 64:5b-7. Confession clears the way for us to cast ourselves on God’s mercy. John Calvin wrote, *“The human heart has so many crannies where vanity hides, so many holes where falsehood lurks, is so decked out with deceiving hypocrisy, that it often dupes itself.”*²

Confession washes us clean of the thought we can cleanse or save ourselves. Gordon MacDonald shared in a sermon the story of “one of the great nineteenth-century preachers, a Scottish Presbyterian, Alexander Whyte, a wonderful man with a powerful sense of the sin that resided in the depths of his soul. His biographer wrote that Whyte served a congregation that dearly loved him for nearly forty years. One day a lovely lady came to him and said,

“Dr. Whyte, I just love being in your presence. You are so saintly.”

Alexander Whyte looked at her with great seriousness and said,

“Madam, if you could look into my soul, what you would see would make you want to spit in my face.”

Like young children reaching out to a parent, Isaiah implores us to call on God’s name and attempt to take hold of God who longs to embrace us. Perhaps the most important verse in this chapter is, **“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”**

This is one of the few places in the Old Testament where God is referred to as “Father.”

Having confessed our sins and repented of them, we place ourselves at the mercy of a loving Father to whom we appeal *in spite of* the record of our past.

¹ Marion de Velder, *“If At First You Don’t Succeed...,”* The Holland Sentinel, (10/24/98).

² John Calvin, A Calvin Treasury, Christianity Today, Vol. 37, no. 4.

Some parents miss when their children were babies. Babies often display pure joy whenever mom or dad walks into the room. They simply want to be with their parent and find great comfort in being held and hugged and snuggled many times throughout the day and night. As we grow and become teenagers sometimes we don't want to be seen or associated with our parents in public. And hugs or holding hands, forget it. We understand this is part of growing up, but the parental longing for the joy and intimacy of the earlier relationship can remain and create a sense of longing. Of course, the hope is that a deeper and more mature relationship will develop between a child and her or his parents as the child grows.

Have you ever wondered if God feels that way about us sometimes? Now that we've "grown up" do we still express joy and excitement simply being in God's presence? Does God miss us running with excitement with our arms lifted up for God to hold us? Our relationship with God is clearly given in the image that **we are the clay God is the potter – we are the work of God's hands**. This is an image both Isaiah and Jeremiah use. We are clay in the hands of God. Ellen White wrote this about the Potter and the Clay.

*"The Potter takes the clay in his hands and molds it and fashions it according to his own will. He kneads it and works it. He tears it apart, and then presses it together. He wets it, and then dries it. He lets it lie for a while without touching it. When it is perfectly pliable, he continues the work of making it a vessel. He forms it into a shape, and on the wheel trims and polishes it. He dries it in the sun, and bakes it in the oven. Thus it becomes a vessel fit for use. So the great Master-worker desires to mold and fashion us. And as the clay is in the hands of the potter, so are we to be in his hands. **We are not to try to do the work of the potter.***

Our part is to yield ourselves to the molding of the Master-worker.³

God is our creator and the creator can both make and fix what is created. Allen Golding and his wife were missionaries in the Philippines and they tell of vacationing in Baguio City in the mountains of Northern Luzon. "While there, we visited the St. Louis Silver School, where gifted silversmiths are trained. We admired exquisite workmanship in the workshop and gift shop, and took home a souvenir - a pure silver money clip embellished with a distinctive design. I carried that money clip for the next 24 years. One day, it finally broke as I slipped a few bills into it. I then took the two pieces of the

³ Ellen White, Vol. 8, *Testimonies for the Church*, 186-187.

money clip back to the silver school in Baguio. One workman, about my age, asked if he could help me. I explained my predicament and laid the pieces in his outstretched hand.

After examining the pieces for a minute or so, he looked up at me and said, *"I designed this clip. I was the only one to make this design. I made all of these that were ever made."* "Can you fix it?" I asked. He replied, *"I designed it. I made it. Of course I can fix it."* (Allen Golding, La Miranda, CA).

God designed us and made us and God can fix us. In sharing our prayers of despair, pleading for deliverance, our troubles don't vanish, but our vision is lifted above our helplessness to God who is our creator and who holds us in loving divine hands that will shape us and mold us if we are willing and if we stay centered on Jesus.

We all need God. We are clay and the job of clay is to yield itself and to be pliable in the hands of the Potter. We allow the Potter to pound out all the imperfections, to pull out all the gravel, to eliminate the lumps and bumps of our sin and disobedience. In a sense, we lift up our arms to God with joy like a young child and ask God to place us in the perfect center of God's will. And we allow God to powerfully, artistically, and creatively to massage us into who God wants us to be. Some of us may be lumpier than others, some times if we're off center or marred God will have to re-work us again. That is okay. We serve and wait for a powerful and a patient God who will continue to work upon us.

So I invite you this advent season, to place your self on the Divine Potter's wheel and into the hands of your Creator so that the Holy One can shape you and mold you into something beautiful for God.