Grace Lutheran Community, 3rd December, 2017: 1st Sunday of Advent, Year B

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[1] If only You would tear the heavens open and come down…
[8] Yet LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our potter;
we all are the work of Your hands.
Isaiah 64:1, 8 *(HCSB)*

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At the last General Synod of the LCA the following resolution was made: *That the Convention of Synod reaffirms its condemnation of all forms of violence in the family and authorises [General Church Council] to commit resources for a church-wide campaign to address the prevalence of Family Violence amongst us, which may include sharing of resources, education initiatives and the provision of pastoral care to the survivors of violence, as well as the perpetrators of abuse.*

These resources have now been released, and at its heart is one that should be supported by all members of the LCA (and I really would commend the LCA Website in this regard www.preventdfv.lca.org.au to you). However, it must be noted that not everyone is in full accord with the resources that have been produced. On the LCA Website is a statement *that "Around 95% of all violence reported in Australia was perpetrated by men."* But this is a testament about **all forms of violence** that is reported. In regards to domestic violence and 'intimate partner violence' the statistics are 76% male against female, 22% female against male, and 2% same-sex. (see page 11, figure 5: https://violenceagainstwomenandchildren.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/abs-personal-safety-survey-victim-perpetrator-sex-and-relationship6.pdf). And when one looks carefully at the LCA in the resources in the FAQ Section in regards to "Is domestic violence only physical abuse?" one can see how domestic family violence can occur by male to female, and female to male. So, again, I commend the LCA Website to you…

One of the other concerns that has been raised is the association with 'The White Ribbon Campaign' (which is a global movement of men and boys working to end male violence against women and girls, founded in November 1991) and its association with 'White Ribbon Australia'. Some have pointed to the "White Ribbon Australia Position Statement: Women's Reproductive Rights" (https://www.whiteribbon.org.au/2017/02/23/womens-reproductive-rights-white-ribbon-australia-position-statement/) which states *"we advocate for… Nationally consistent access to safe and legal abortion, including late-term abortion in all states and territories"*

When it comes to the issues before us we know that they are complex and multi-layered. No one should experience or suffer from domestic violence. Also, as a Lutheran Church we have a public position that abortion is against God's Word (https://lca.box.net/shared/static/nt26xftbhk0uz7gxicom.pdf – but this statement is also made acknowledging that there are complexities to this….

At a simple level we know that we are called to live according to God's Commandments. We are called to 'strive daily to lead a holy life, as Christ has made us holy'. But we know that his world is a dark and complex place. Not all is lived according to God's holy word. And our hearts ache at the pain and suffering we see in this world.

Today's Old Testament lesson, Isaiah 64:1-8, is the anguished outburst of a desperate people. Isaiah prays the prayer of a people who long for a God.

Behind today's Scripture is Isaiah's vision of exile and judgement, of a temple in ruins, and many people's lives in ruin. Isaiah had seen (and was called to speak about) how God's people had again departed from God through their own deliberate turning from Him and His ways. Even though the people had felt they were moving 'onwards and upwards, theirs was a journey leading away from God… And so Isaiah prayed that 'if only the Lord would show his mighty presence and power as He had done for Israel long ago (such as at Sinai, or on Zion, or at the dedication of the Temple) then maybe they (and the nations around) would tremble at God's presence and change their ways'.

This is not the sort of text that many people would 'naturally' have as one of the first Bible Readings for Advent, is it? As we prepare for Christmas, shouldn't there be 'happier readings' about the coming of God, our Saviour? But so often, as 'church', we are somewhat out of step with the spirit of the times. In the time leading up to Christmas the world wants Christmas jingles. Instead we sing a lament! And this lament sets the stage for Advent. This lament reminds us of a real world in which things are not going well. The world is not a perfect place. And we are called to reflect upon our own lives. And Isaiah's prayer is helpful to us at many levels. There are four (4) aspects to this prayer to reflect upon.

First, there is the call to prayer itself: "If only You would tear the heavens open and come down". This is not the prayer of an idealistic man on the way up, but a person who sees the world as it is (in this case, Isaiah's vision of his people from exile, a temple in ruin, and lives in ruin).

Perhaps, remembering his vision as a young man in the temple, standing now in the rubble of a lost temple, the ruins of lost faith, Isaiah blurts out, "God, tear open the heavens (again) and come down!"

The prayer begins by simply calling to God for help…

But then Isaiah continues. His petition is based on God's past actions (64:1-5a). A basic idea that underlies the entire Old Testament is that God may be known by His actions in the world. This view arises primarily from the exodus experience. During the exodus, the Hebrews came into relationship with God, they knew God, because He had acted in history to deliver them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 6:6-7; Deuteronomy 4:32-35). His actions revealed who He was.

But the next part of the prayer acknowledges our true human nature. Isaiah says (64:5-6): *But we have sinned, and You were angry. How can we be saved if we remain in our sins? All of us have become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like a polluted garment."*

There is a story of a pastor who had been asked to preach in the church of one of the famous television preachers whom millions watch every Sunday. On the way from the airport, the guest received these instructions: “People worship with us in order to feel good about themselves. Therefore, don’t mention the cross in your sermon. And don’t dwell too much on sin.”

C.S Lewis once said, “The Christian faith is a thing of unspeakable joy.” But he went on to say, “But it does not begin with joy, but rather in despair. And it is no good trying to reach the joy without first going through the despair.”

What is really amazing in Isaiah’s prayer is that it not only acknowledges the state of people’s sin, but he also seeks that God would come and bring judgement upon His people. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis: “The Christian faith is a thing of unspeakable grace… But it is no good claiming that grace without going through repentance.”

Although it has largely been lost in our world today, the Advent season is a penitential season. It is a time where we, as Christians, remember why it is that the eternal Son of God took upon Himself our corrupted human flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary. This was on account of our fallen, sinful human condition. Therefore, this is a time to repent; a time to mourn; a time to confess sin.

But then Isaiah continues his prayer on the basis of trust in God: *“Yet LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our potter; we all are the work of Your hands”* (Isaiah 64:8).

Our salvation is not the result of any of our efforts, abilities, intelligent choices, personal characteristics, or acts of service we may perform. And… as God has dramatically intervened in history in many ways (think of Noah; the Exodus; the battle of Jericho; Daniel in the lion’s den; Deborah; Esther; etc), God has dramatically intervened in Christ Jesus – the greatest event in human history.

At the beginning of our ‘Advent season’ we actually start by looking forward to Christ’s ‘second advent’. But Advent also lives in the present – in the faith that Christ comes to us now. He comes as we read and hear His Words, as we receive the water and the Word in Baptism, and as we eat and drink His body and blood at the altar.

Advent is a fact of history. Jesus has come. We call that the incarnation. Incarnation literally means making into flesh or taking on the flesh. Without God coming in the flesh - without the incarnation, all the other comings of God would do us no good. Without the incarnation, there would be no suffering and death on the cross for our salvation - no resurrection - no baptism - no body and blood at the altar. The incarnation is a fact of history, but it has timeless effects. [Galatians 4:4-5: *When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.* We receive a sure place as member of our heavenly Father’s family through His Son, Christ Jesus. God has ‘opened the heavens and come down’.

Our hearts can ache at what we see as so much trouble and heartache in this world. How shall we respond to many issues and needs before us? The really amazing thing about Isaiah's prayer is that he prays that God would bring His judgement into the world. But it is also when we truly know God's judgement in the world being achieved ***in*** Christ Jesus that we may also see His salvation for us all.

This is the season of preparation for the coming of Christ. We examine our lives. We reflect on our need for God. And we celebrate that Christ has come into our daily lives with His holy and forgiving love to help us in every situation in life. Amen.