

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Romans 64:1-9

November 27, 2005
Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

- 1 Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!
 2 As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!
 3 For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
 4 Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
 5 You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?
 6 All of us have become like one who is unclean, all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
 7 No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.
 8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.
 9 Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people.

When I interviewed for this position, some members of the search committee expressed concerns about my political activism. From my understanding, it's not that anyone minded that I'm active politically, holding membership in a state political party and serving as a precinct delegate in Kasson Township, but rather it was just that no one wanted my politics to spill over into the pulpit. When I met with a couple members of the search committee to discuss the issue, I explained that the pulpit is for the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A political stump or soapbox is for the preaching of politics. I assured the committee that I understood the difference and would keep politics out of the pulpit. But, I'm going back on my word. It's high time for me to break my silence on political issues. I cannot, in good conscience, keep my mouth shut any longer.

It's about time the church talked about politics. After all, our personal politics, just like our personal morals, beliefs, and attitudes, need to be informed—first and foremost—by our religious beliefs. But, I also believe that our religious understandings need to be informed by politics—not the politics of 2005 AD but the politics of 1 BCE. If we don't have a grasp on what was going on in the society and governments in the last years before the birth of Jesus, we don't have as full of an understanding of Advent and the impending birth of Jesus as we might otherwise have. And that is why it's essential for me to preach politics on this first Sunday of Advent.

So, if you're still anxious about what kind of politics I'm going to preach today—especially those of you who were members of the search committee and have been feeling uneasy since I first opened my mouth to preach this morning—you can relax. I'm preaching the politics of the end of the era before Jesus, those years we refer to as BCE.

We often don't consider the history or the politics of the time right before Jesus' birth. All most folks can remember from the Old Testament is that the Israelites, under Moses' leadership, got through their forty years wandering in the wilderness during the Exodus and were finally delivered into the Promised Land. The rest of the Old Testament is kind of a blur. Then the

story of the Bible is picked up approximately 1300 years—give or take a few centuries—later, ‘round about the time Joseph and Mary take off for that fateful trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Their journey—across mountains and desert that took them from a their home in the north of Israel to a faraway place--Bethlehem in the south--is an apt introduction to the political climate of the day.

All was not well in that little town of Bethlehem, or really anywhere in the Middle East for that matter. Judah, the political state in which Bethlehem was located—indeed all of modern Israel and Palestine—was occupied by Roman troops. The native people of the region, including Mary and Joseph, were forced to live under the rule of Rome. Taxes were levied against the poor and the poor were getting poorer as the Romans and their hand-chosen native governors, men like King Herod who we hear about in the Christmas story, were getting richer. Mary and Joseph, though people of the Jewish faith whose ancestors had belonged to the independent nation of Israel, were on their way to Bethlehem for the Roman census. We might think of it in terms of Canadians invading the US via Sioux St. Marie. They’d set up military and political outposts throughout Michigan, usurping our local governments and stripping us of our constitutional rights as American citizens. And then, to add insult to injury, the Canadians would make all of us travel to Port Huron so they could take down our names and contact information. Two weeks later, we’d get a tax bill and all of the money we paid in taxes would go to pad the pockets of Canadian government officials in far-off Ottawa while we struggled to buy food and fuel. That’s kind of what it would be like—only all of the male children born would be killed by the Canadians, just like Herod ordered the killing of all Jewish male babies at the time of the birth of Jesus.

That’s just a glimpse of what it might have been like—few jobs, little food, foreign troops marching all over town making a mess of things, and, possibly most upsetting for the Jewish people, the diffusion of their religious and cultural heritage. But, in the midst of their despair, they had something to hold onto—a promise in which they believed—they knew that something, or more appropriately someone was coming. Someone who would be the messiah, who would save them from their misery and restore them to the position of power they once had. Their prophet Isaiah had foretold it. In this morning’s passage, we hear him foretelling the people’s lament, their sorrow at the sorry state of affairs in which they find themselves. They know they’ve been unfaithful to God, they haven’t done what God asked. They consider the Roman occupation, and the Babylonian occupation before that, punishment for their unfaithfulness. But they think it’s time for the punishment to end. They are sorry. They confess their sin. And, maybe most importantly, they confess their belief that God will take care of them in the end. They admit that God is their creator, calling God potter, admitting that they are but clay in the hands of God. They are weary, desperate, and tired. And, they are ready. Ready for God to come to them, to restore their power, might, and position. They have, in a word, hope.

And we know what Isaiah didn’t at the time, indeed what the people living in Bethlehem at the very moment of Jesus’ birth didn’t know. We know that their hopes were fulfilled--God did come—Emmanuel, God with us—just as it had been foretold. But, the results weren’t what the people thought they’d be. They were envisioning glory, power, and might—for a big Sha-Bang announcing God’s return to God’s chosen people. But instead, they got a helpless little wrinkly

baby born in a dirty old cave where animals lived. It's not what they had envisioned, but, in the end, for those who believed, it was everything they had hoped for and more.

We all have ideas and visions of how we'd like God to be at work in our lives. We envision getting a better job. We envision a new medicine or treatment making us better. We envision an idyllic retirement Up North. We envision having content and productive children. We envision a church free of controversy or strife. We envision a happy holiday season in which our hearts are as warm and cozy as a favorite pair of jeans coming straight out of the dryer. But, as we learn from the Christmas story, God rarely works how we might envision God working. We don't find a medicine that helps us. A new job isn't much better than an old one. An idyllic retirement is interrupted by depression and loneliness. A church turns out to be like any other institution—vulnerable to the actions and motives of people behaving poorly. Our children have issues and cause us to have issues too. And the holiday season—well, we spend too much, eat too much, try to do too much, and expect too much of ourselves and others and end up disappointed and exhausted when all's said and done. Indeed, life doesn't always work out how we envisioned it. But that's not to say that God isn't at work in us and around us. The Christmas story reminds us that, though it might not be in the way the oppressed people of ancient Israel envisioned it happening, God was at work in the story. And, the Christmas story also reminds us that God is at work in our lives and knowing that God is at work gives us hope.

And that's the good news for this first Sunday in Advent—because God is at work in our lives, we always have hope. And though we're sometimes like the folks in Bethlehem, right there at the coming of the messiah, and yet completely oblivious to the fact that Emmanuel has come, we find comfort in knowing that there is always hope.

Advent is the time when we remember that we, too, are waiting for Emmanuel—for God to be among us again. And it's not just that we're waiting for the pageants and story telling that remind us of Jesus coming into this world. But it is also a time in which we acknowledge that we are waiting for, hoping for, Jesus to return. It's the season in which we too, like our ancient Jewish ancestors, in the midst of great trial and tribulation, know that someone is coming to save us. That one day God will come and be among us. And that's the day on which our earthly politicking and divisions will cease. That's the day when the divisions of red state/blue state that divide us will cease and we'll all be living in purple states, and we will all, as it says in the Gospel according to John, "be as one." That's the day when the lion shall lie down with the lamb. That's the day when all sorrow, desperation, anxiety, illness, violence, and grief will end.

And that's why we light the candle of hope—to remind us that God came to a people who were aching and desperate. And it's not just an act to remind us of what happened in the past, we light the candle to express our conviction that Christ will come again, that our future is with God. And that, my friends of all political persuasions and opinions, is a day worth waiting for, praying for, and always, always, hoping for.