



THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

Mold Us for Your Return

Isaiah 63:16b-17; 64:1-8 (NIV84)

You, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. ¹⁷ Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance.

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, and 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.

It's cliché, isn't it, to talk about how bad the world is by going through recent headlines? Why does the media feel the need to tell us of all the political unrest over the president's executive order regarding the deportation of illegal immigrants and the violent rioting happening in Ferguson after Officer Wilson was not indicted by the grand jury and the constant threat of ebola being the new disease that is going to ravage our world? It's so bad out there!

With it being so bad out there, do you ever find yourself praying to God that he would come back and clean this all up, that he would reform and mold all of these things into something new, something better, something pleasing to him? If so, you are not alone.

The prophet Isaiah was praying for God to return and to mold the Israelites back to what they should be. In a time when the nation of Israel was prospering externally, Isaiah saw how bad things were getting spiritually. So many kings had turned the Israelites away from the Lord. They had gone after other gods for protection from foreign invaders. They had trusted in themselves rather than the Lord. The Lord handed these people over to their unbelief. This is why Isaiah laments, "Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you?" (verse 17) This needed to be changed. The Israelites needed to be molded to conform to the Lord's ways.

What else could a believer do but cry out to the Lord to return and reshape everything, mold it all as it should be? "Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance." (verse 17) "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!" (chapter 64 verse 1) "Come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!" (verse 2) Isaiah was asking God on behalf of the believers to come down and judge. Restore justice. Reshape this world. We are your people; you are our Father. We are your servants; we bear your name. You are our Redeemer from of old, the family protector. That is your name; live up to it! Come and judge! Reshape and mold us to your ways.

"But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?" (verse 5) Notice carefully that it was not an "us" vs. "them" scenario as Isaiah was talking about how the Lord would reshape the world. Although there were believers and unbelievers belonging to the same nation, Isaiah does not exempt himself in the pronouncement of sin. As he considers the Lord returning and fixing everything, reshaping it all according to his ways, he realizes that this means him as well.

We pray for that same thing as Isaiah did and it is right for us to call on our Lord to save us, to come down and deal with all the injustice and all the bad things that are going on in this world. God is the one who has obligated himself to act on our behalf. He is our Redeemer, the one who buys us back from sin which holds us captive. If anyone can save us, he can. He can reshape this world to be something good again.

When the Lord answers this prayer, he will return. This will be the end, the great and glorious day of the Lord. On that day, his justice will prevail. The world will be reshaped and molded to his perfect will. All wrongs will be righted. God will get rid of all the turmoil and unrest. We will finally have true and everlasting peace when he returns.

That picture sounds great – all that peace and reform of everything wrong with this world. We want him to reshape this world, but in doing so, he will have to reshape us as well.

As we heard Isaiah talking, we could just as easily put ourselves into these verses from Isaiah 64. “But when [I] continued to sin against [your ways], you were angry. How then can [I] be saved? [I] have become like one who is unclean, and all [my] righteous acts are like filthy rags; [I] shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind [my] sins sweep [me] away. [I don’t call] on your name or strive to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from [me] and made [me] waste away because of [my] sins.” (verses 5-7)

You hear those verses with your name in them, and you pretty much want to say, “Nah, God, I know I’m not that bad. I seek you out. I pray to you. My sins aren’t that bad that you would leave me to waste away from your presence and from your love. I may sin, but I don’t sin all the time. You forgave me. You love me. You don’t really feel this way about me. These words are all a hyperbole, right?”

What if this is not a hyperbole – an exaggeration – of my sins? What if my sins are really this bad? “But this can’t be me. I’m forgiven. I’m loved.” Yes, you are. But there is a warning for us, same as it was for Isaiah and the other believers in his day. We need to be reshaped, molded into something new. We need our paths in life to be shaped away from our sins.

God truly is angry with us when we sin against him, when we do not continue to follow his ways and gladly do what is right. What temptations do you have in your life that are perpetual problems, temptations that drag you back on to the unrighteous path? Is there a vice that you know you should stay away from, yet you keep getting sucked back in to it again and again? For each of us, we have our personal temptations to continue to sin against God’s ways. Your wrestle and my wrestle may be on different things, but the outcome is the same. If I roll over and let temptation take me, if I lay down and die by committing this sin when the opportunity arises, then I am being molded by sin, then I am the one who continually sins against God’s way. I am letting myself be dragged from God’s path. I am shaping my life for destruction, a path that hides the Lord’s face from me, one that leads me to be shriveled up like a leaf and blown away by the wind before the judgment of the Lord almighty. Then the question becomes so scarily pertinent, “Who then can I be saved?” (verse 5)

Isaiah saw the Israelites were being dragged away by temptation, being shaped against the Lord as they continually sinned against his ways and did not always gladly do right. Even with how bad of sinners God’s people had shaped, he was still their Father. The covenant that he had given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob still stood true. All nations would be blessed by their descendant. The covenant that was made to Adam would still come to fruition, that God would crush the head of the serpent by the offspring of the woman, destroying the devil’s work. God was still their Redeemer from of old. God could still shape them into something new.

So, Isaiah boldly asks God to act, not just to come down and judge, but to shape them and mold them. Isaiah makes the declaration of the believers, “We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.” (verse 8) Do with us as you will. We want to follow your ways. We want to gladly do right. We want you to shape us, Lord. We don’t want to continue in our sins against you and your ways. Mold us to what you want us to be.

That same prayer is echoed centuries later by us. Lord, I see how I am a sinner. I know that all my righteous acts are like filthy rags. I know that I deserve to be blown away into nothingness on account of my sins. I deserve to have your face, your love, hidden from me because I continue to sin against you and your ways and be molded to evil. But, Lord, you have saved me. You have not taken away your promises. You are still my Father. You created me. You put your name on me. You said you would protect me, that you would redeem me - buy my life back from the grave, back from the way to hell, and reshape it to your will and perfection. I know that you have done this through Jesus Christ, your one dear Son, who died on the cross to take away all my uncleanness. Because of him, you no longer hide your face from me; you no longer make me waste away because of my sins, but you shape me into something new.

So, here I am, Lord. You are the potter; we are the clay. I am putty in your hands. Mold me. Mold me a hand that reaches for your Word to fight temptation like your Son Jesus did. Mold my hands together in prayer asking for your strength to do your will. Shape me. Shape me into the righteous man that you want. Shape my schedule to make you a priority. Shape my path away from sin and always on to your way, to walk and live by your commands. Shape me in repentance and forgiveness so that I am ready when you come back to reshape everything. I expect you, O Lord, to come down and do this awesome thing of reshaping me throughout life to be your child. Amen.