

Isaiah 63:16f; 64:1-8

November 27, 2011 – 1st SUNDAY IN ADVENT

The clay and the Potter

✦ **Return for your servants. (63:16-17)**

✦ **Bring awesome aid. (64:1-8)**

In the name of Jesus, our Advent King, dearly redeemed believers:

In August of 1958, a little boy went out to play. He could barely walk because he was just over one year old. So he spent much of his time on the ground. Naturally, his mother kept a careful eye on him. When she saw him playing in the mud, she quickly ran out to rescue him, clean him up and send him back out with a scolding. “Stay out of that mud, Mark!” A few minutes later? Same thing, only this time a spanking. By the third trip to the mud puddle, Mom got out her camera. Years later my second daughter Sarah gave a title to that picture: “Original Sin.” No one has to teach us how to soil ourselves.

On an art scholarship to Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, Minnesota, Sarah drew a picture of her grandma’s picture of the middle generation in the mud. I took a picture of Sarah’s picture of my mom’s picture of me and titled my picture, “Like father...like daughter....” It’s all so natural we would not know unless God told us: **“Dust you are and to dust you will return.”** (Genesis 3:19 NIV84) Without God to rescue and train us, the muddy mess we make of our lives would earn us all eternal damnation. God came to earth as the Advent Christ to teach us to say: **“We are the clay, You are the Potter.”**

✦ **Return for your servants. (63:16-17)**

“But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you?” Abraham had been called by God away from his family idols in Ur of the Chaldees to the land of Canaan. **The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.”** (Genesis 12:7 NIV84) Through Abraham’s son Isaac and grandson Jacob the promise passed until the famine that took Jacob and his twelve sons with their families down to the land of Egypt. **“At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD’s divisions left Egypt.”** (Exodus 12:41 NIV84) After 40 years of wandering with Moses in the desert, the LORD empowered Joshua to lead them back into the Promised Land. All should have gone well, but the priest failed to preach God’s Word, the kings failed to live it, and the prophets eventually changed it to leave the people worshiping idols instead of the true God. They would need a new Prophet, Priest and King.

Even when commanded to ask for a sign, wicked King Ahaz refused. **Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”** (Isaiah 7:13f NIV84) 700 years would pass as that promise was repeated in many ways by many prophets. Meanwhile, far away to Assyria and then to Babylon, God caused His faithless people to wander. They failed to learn from the example of Pharaoh, so the LORD said centuries later through His Apostle Paul: **“God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.”** (Romans 9:18 NIV84)

We deserve no better from God. If you run a red light and kill someone, you can’t say, “I didn’t see it.” Ignorance is no excuse under God’s Law either. His perfect Law condemns us all. I can’t save my children, but pass on to them my sin of origin back to Adam. With Isaiah we pray for God’s mercy: **“Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance.”** Sainted Lutheran pastor-professor George Stoeckhardt: “O Lord, I know my helplessness, so I pray thee never let it come to this, that in the hardness of my heart I harden myself in impenitence, so that thou must cast me off forever.”

✦ Bring awesome aid. (64:1-8)

God's people had seen the mighty acts of God in Egypt. Throughout their history the LORD had shown His power over nature itself. Isaiah saw the devastation of sin on his fellow Jews and pleaded with God to do the awesome things He did of old: ***“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! 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! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.”*** God who created nature can bend and break the laws of nature at will.

This He did in America not so long ago. Many people don't realize that the Cascade Mountains running north and south through Oregon and Washington are dormant volcanoes. Mount Saint Helens in Washington State, had been quiet for 123 years, since 1857. But then in the Spring of 1980, earthquakes began to rattle the area just east, north east of Portland, Oregon. At 7:00 AM, Sunday, May 18th, a scientist reported that his laser-beam measurements made moments earlier indicated that Mount St. Helens' activity showed no change from the preceding month. The rate of bulge movement, sulfur dioxide emission, and ground temperature readings did not reveal any unusual changes. Suddenly at 8:32 AM, a magnitude 5.1 earthquake triggered part of the volcano into one of history's largest landslides. Travelling at 110-155 mph, the slide toppled trees, moved Spirit Lake and Toutle River, killing 57 people in 24 square miles. Mount Saint Helens lost 1300 feet off its top. It took less than twenty seconds.¹

Did Americans notice? Sure. Did they repent and turn to the Lord? No! The problem is that we are still as deaf and blind by nature as ever. ***“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.”*** This is why God placed His people in the heart of history on that narrow strip of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Desert. He wanted the nations of the world to pass through His land where His Word would sound forth from His temple in Jerusalem and bring His salvation to the ends of the earth. Isaiah and all the prophets spoke of God's plan to bring us Gentiles, the non-Jews into the shelter of His grace in Christ. But when God's people strayed, they hid the Gospel. When people do not hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, how can they believe? They make up their own gods and ultimately worship death.

Yet the LORD says, ***“I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’ All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations.”*** (Isaiah 65:1f NIV84) Because of God's persistent mercy, Isaiah could see reality in hope: ***“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?”*** How, indeed? With Isaiah we must all confess that on our good days, we still cannot meet God's perfect standards. ***“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.”*** Urban blight is just a reflection of the sickness in our souls.

Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to all. For 100 years from Isaiah to Jeremiah God kept calling His people to repent: ***“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?” declares the LORD. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.”*** (Jeremiah 18:6 NIV84)

In more history than this sermon or our hearts can hold God continued generation after generation to make and mold His people. He won our hearts with the first Advent of Christ, born to live in our place, then die in our place and rise again to glory. ***“We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.”*** As generations come and generations go, the Word of God rings solid and true. ***“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”*** (Isaiah 1:18 NIV84) Form us, O LORD – your Word, your will, your way – in Christ alone. Amen.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1980_eruption_of_Mount_St._Helens