

# RESTORE US, O GOD

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*ISAIAH 64:1-9*

*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*

*BY: RYAN DUECK*

*NOVEMBER 30, 2014/1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT*

Like many of you, I watched with grim fascination this week as the events unfolded in Ferguson, Missouri. On Monday, a grand jury decided not to indict Darren Wilson, the white police officer who fatally shot eighteen-year-old Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager.

I watched as people lined up with angry faces and voices, as buildings were burned, as arrests were made. I watched as the violence threatened to bubble over and spill out into a community where racial tensions have been at a fevered pitch since the event itself took place in August.

Like many of you, I have watched the ongoing environmental protests in Burnaby, BC. The protests are over the activity of Kinder Morgan, an American energy company that is doing surveying and other exploratory work in the hopes of building a tunnel through the mountain to transport oil to the deep-water ports of Indian Arm which will lead to Burrard Inlet and out to the Pacific Ocean.

I watched as people lined up with angry faces and voices, in front of equipment and workers, demanding that Kinder Morgan's activity stop. There are aboriginal groups, environmental groups; people connected to Simon Fraser University (which is on the mountain), and many others who are determined to prevent this pipeline from ever being built.

Now, I know that there are differing views about the *merits* of the angry faces in both cases.

I know that there has been and will continue to be debate about the outcome of the grand jury's deliberations in Missouri, and I know that there has been and will continue to be debate about the merits of building oil pipelines to the west coast.

**But today, on this first Sunday of Advent, I am thinking simply about the angry faces.**

**Even more specifically, I'm thinking about what's *behind* those angry faces?**

Whatever our politics, whatever our views about the rationale for protests during situations like these, I think there is a common human longing that animates events like these and many others around the world.

I think that however confused or accurate the expression, however tainted by self-interest or media-fuelled hysteria, however well informed or poorly informed, however reactionary or carefully and measured these angry faces might be, **underneath it all is the basic human belief that things ought to be better than they are in our world! The world ought to look different than it does!**

Behind the angry faces on our screens are some pretty basic convictions at work:

- People ought to be treated fairly, no matter the colour of their skin.
- Money ought not to trump careful stewardship of the created world, it ought not to trump agreements that were made and treaties that were signed with Canada's First Nations.
- The rich and the powerful should not always get their way.
- Peace and justice should be more than just rumours from another world.
- Something like *harmony* between human beings and in the state of our planet is *possible*

In his book *Simply Christian*, N.T. Wright calls this basic human longing for justice the "echo of a voice." All of us, whether we have been walking with God for years or barely give God a second thought have an intuitive sense that the world ought to be a better place!

And so, people cry out. In anger. In protest. In frustration. In confusion and sadness and desperate hope.

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For Christians, Advent is when we take all of this and we direct it toward God.

The language in our text from Isaiah today is abrupt, even violent.

***O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...***

The Hebrew word that is translated “tear” or “rend” is used in other places in Scripture to describe the tearing of clothing to express grief and despair.

This is not a Christmas-y feel-good longing for a divine hug. This is forceful, expectant, even *angry* language!

Some of you know Ray Friesen from Swift Current, SK. Yesterday he wrote his own version of this passage and posted it to Facebook:

Ray began with these words:

*Break down the [expletive] door, already!  
Come crashing into this world now, without restraint*

I think Ray’s translation accurately conveys the sentiment of this passage. This is not a longing for Gentle Jesus, meek and mild. This is a longing for God to right the wrongs of history, to act for justice, to cause the earth itself to tremble and heave and groan.

The language of Isaiah strips away all religious pretense and piety. What our world needs, what *we* need is a dramatic overhaul. Not a bit of tinkering around the edges, but a radical upending, a destructive reordering of “business as usual.”

We’ve seen enough of injustice. We’ve seen enough of war. We’ve seen enough of disharmony. We’ve seen enough of death and disease. Every single day, we are wearied by the news of conflict, of chaos, of sin and suffering... And it never seems to relent.

Advent is where we acknowledge our longing for things to be better than they are, where we say, “*We cannot fix this. We cannot do this on our own. **We need you. Come down!!***”

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I have other faces in mind, too. Not so much *angry* faces as *weary* faces, *defeated* faces, faces that have lost hope of things ever being different.

Faces that recognize that the reason that the world is not as it should be is because *we* are not as *we* should be.

I spent some time on Tuesday at the soup kitchen. I had a long conversation with a man who had spent a lifetime struggling with addictions, with poor life choices, with sabotaging relationships.

At one point in our conversation, after talking about the people he was estranged from, the toll that his choices had taken on his life, and his hopes for reconciliation, he looked off into the distance and simply said, “You know, I done a lot of things that I shouldn’t have...”

He’s not alone. We all have.

Our text in Isaiah does not *stop* with a pleading for God to come and fix all the big, bad things in our world.

Isaiah goes on—indeed, he spends *most* of his time—looking inward.

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.

No one calls on your name  
or strives to lay hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us  
and have given us over to our sins.

This text *is* a cry that God would kick down the door and make things new.

**But it is also a very deep and profound acknowledgment that as human beings we so often turn our backs on the very source of justice, peace, and hope for a better world.**

We do not love God and neighbour as we ought to. We do not “strive to lay hold of God.” We want the world to be a better place, yet so often we turn away from injustice or refuse to recognize the ways in which we contribute to it.

We want God to come, to act, to deliver, but we sometimes fail to acknowledge our own complicity in the world being the way that it is.

*O that you would tear open the heavens... O that you would break down the door...*

*O that you would come to our world and make things right...*

These are among the deepest longings that we have...

**But Isaiah knows that these longings must be accompanied by, *O that you would restore us, and make us into a people prepared for your coming!***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it this way in an entry called “Not Everyone Can Wait” from the wonderful collection of his Advent writings called *God is in the Manger*:

The only ones who can wait are people who carry restlessness around with them... Thus, Advent can be celebrated only by those whose souls give them no peace, who know they are poor and incomplete, and who sense something of the greatness that is supposed to come.

Advent is a time for restlessness.

It is a time to remember our place—that we are poor and incomplete, that while we can do many things to bring about a more just order, while we can do many things to align ourselves with the intentions of God, **the new creation that all of our longing finally points toward can only be a gift of God.**

It is a time for turning toward God, maker of heaven and earth, author of our story, the one we *need* to come in fullness.

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Our text this morning concludes with the well-loved image:

Yet you, Lord, are our Father.  
We are the clay, you are the potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.

Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord;  
do not remember our sins forever.  
Oh, look on us, we pray,  
for we are all your people.

These words anchor us theologically as we enter the Advent season. We are not our own. We are clay, to be shaped by the potter’s hand.

From what I understand, making pottery is not a pleasant experience for the clay. There is a great deal of kneading, pounding, shaping, twisting, reshaping, etc.

But this is the best and safest place for us to be, because it is only here that the Potter can do his work. It is only here that the clay can be turned from a lifeless, shapeless lump into something useful and beautiful, something that reflects the Potter's creativity, skill, and purpose.

I want to close with the words of Debra Dean Murphy, a professor of religious studies at West Virginia Wesleyan College. These are from a recent post on her blog:

So as Advent people we watch and we wait and we hope. Not as those who regard watching, waiting, and hoping as personal virtues to enhance our already comfortable lives but as those who, in solidarity with our neighbors near and far, with sisters and brothers whose lives are inextricably entangled with our own, might pray to God with the prophet Isaiah: *Would that you might meet us doing right.*<sup>1</sup>

May this be our prayer this Advent.

*Restore us, O God. Would that you might meet us doing right.*

Amen.



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<sup>1</sup> <http://debradeanmurphy.wordpress.com/2014/11/29/advent-after-ferguson/>