

**Songs of Forgiveness and Hope**  
**Isaiah 64**  
**First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**  
**August 2, 2020**  
**Rev. Jill Cameron Michel**

I loved art class in elementary school. I suspect there were several reasons. I was fascinated by our art teacher, a creative woman who allowed us to call her not Miss or Mrs., but by her first name, Katie. I loved trying out new mediums and discovering new techniques. I loved entering the classroom on each art day often not knowing what we would be doing. Perhaps it is the child in me who dreamed of being an artist who keeps hanging on to an elementary school art portfolio filled with drawings and paintings, art made of tin and yarn, and so many other things. As far as I was concerned, I would have been happy to skip both gym and music and be in art for every specials period.

And for my school aged self, there was no day better than when Katie told us it was time to work with clay. We put on heavy cloth aprons and one table at a time would walk over to the wooden box and dig our hands into the clay to pull out the amount we needed. We started with pinch pots and then were allowed to get more creative. And when we found a shape we wanted to keep, our creations were set aside for the kiln. But, until we were ready, the clay could always be kept fresh and malleable, ready to be reshaped when the next creative spark hit.

And I can't help but have images of the art classroom at Hiawatha Elementary School come to mind when I hear the words from Isaiah 64, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."

And yet, it's also good not to romanticize this too much. It is important to remember the context.

As we talked about last week, the later part of Isaiah seems to speak to a period after the Jewish people have been in exile for decades. They vacillate between hope, especially as King Cyrus of Persia comes on the scene, and hopelessness, as they wonder if exile really is their forever home, as they - especially the older generations - long for a return to Jerusalem and the land they understand to be their own.

And today's passage seems to carry this theme of hopelessness. This is a communal lament - a crying out to God, an expression of grief. Here they are longing for God to be made known, that both they and their enemies might have

no doubt of God's power. They are calling on God to show up and to forgive their sin.

And, just in case you noticed that line in verse 5 which in the New Revised Standard Version says, "But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed" and get caught up worrying about how they are blaming God for their sin, let me reassure you that scholars recognize there is difficult Hebrew here so this is more about translation issues than anything. In fact, the New International Version reads, "But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry."

And that is important...not because God isn't big enough to handle our outbursts and our blame. In fact, God is. But it is important because part of what we hear in this lament is their ability to name their part, their sin, their need for reshaping, their desire to be recreated.

Some of that was inevitably about their understanding that it was their own sin that got them into this predicament in the first place. But I suspect some of their willingness to confess their sin and their desire to be reshaped also had to do with their hope that they would again return home, that they would again rebuild the temple, that they would again be a people with a land, that they would again be known as God's faithful people.

And so, they called out to God - the one they understood to be their creator, to be their divine parent, and they put themselves in God's hands, ready to be reshaped. They put themselves in God's hands, not as a hard, dried out people refusing to see a new way, but as a malleable people ready to be remade. And as hopeless as so much of this lament feels, the image of God as potter and the people as the clay is a reminder of the hope they still held. It is a reminder that God didn't only make them once, as the creation stories celebrate, but that the entirety of human life is about making and remaking, creating and recreating.

So, friends, what about us?

After all we are living in a time that seems to be more full of lament than celebration. We wake up day after day to headlines that just seem to reinforce how our world is falling apart. We long - if not for the "good ol' days" at least for days that look different from the ones we are living in right now. And, in these days it is normal to sometimes wonder if God hasn't just forgotten us all, or just given up on us.

And yet, what if we echo the words of the ancient people? What if we claim enough hope to acknowledge that the days are hard, that things are not as we wish, but that we are still willing to believe?

And what if we echo the words of the ancient people and admit that there is a lot of this mess that we have gotten ourselves into? What if - rather than pointing out the sins of the other (which seems to be a favorite pastime) - we learned individually and communally to confess our own sins, to seek forgiveness, and to be malleable enough to learn a new way, to hear a new voice, to be reshaped for something better, to be willing to live in ways that more closely reflect the breadth of God's love and compassion?

And so today we sang those familiar words, "Change my heart, O God, make it ever true. Change my heart, O God, may I be like you."

Because, friends, isn't this what we are really wanting? To be those who reflect God...to be those who live in the ways of Jesus...to be those whose lives contribute to make this world better?

Yes, when we hear this scripture, when we sing these words, we have to face our sin with honesty. We have to be willing to see our places of brokenness. We have to be willing to admit that sometimes we are anything but malleable, sometimes we stand firm in our stubbornness rather than listening to God.

But, when we sing these words and when we embrace this vision of God as the potter to our clay, we pray a prayer of hope...we set ourselves again in God's direction...we open ourselves to being recreated, to becoming the best God intends us to be.

May we not only hear Isaiah's words or sing the words of this song, but may we place ourselves directly in the palm of God's hands...may we become that which God can create anew...and may this be an act of hope for this world.

Amen.