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Isaiah 64

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Filthy Cloth

Welcome to our first Sunday of Advent. Now we will join together to do what is most difficult in our modern day. Wait. But waiting is not a passive task, it is active. We must get ready as we wait. We must spend a few weeks getting ready for God to come on earth.

When you were growing up have you ever heard a theology of you being “damaged goods?” Maybe you were damaged because of the cocktail of feelings that you had in your youth. Or maybe you grew up with the idea of original sin that said since you are descended from Adam and Eve, you must pay for their sins. Or maybe someone threw the ten commandments at you and declared you sinful because you lied at some point in your life.

I know that I’ve done that to people. When I was in high school I joined a mission trip to Florida during spring break to witness to my fellow teens. During this time I was given a script, go through the ten commandments and see if they had disobeyed one of them, mostly people stole something from their parents or lied. Then I used this “wickedness” to explain how they were going to hell if they did not repent and start going to church.

And the first time I picked up this passage, that is what I thought of it. Isaiah presents us a God who is angry because of the people's sin. A God who has abandoned the people because they have transgressed. And then I heard the most provocative of the verses here, "we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth."

I read this and I was like geez, I need to preach on this? What a downer.

But the issue is that the terms "unclean" and "filthy cloth" are more complex than their surface-level meanings. Today, many Christians think that being unclean is synonymous with being sinful, but being unclean is a ritual state of being. It's like not being mentally prepared for communion. Someone could become unclean by touching a carcass or a pig or by giving birth. And all you needed to do to become clean was to wash with water and wait for the prescribed seven days.

The term filthy cloth was more difficult to translate but according to Ivan Friesen, it has something to do with repentance. Perhaps it has something to do with the Biblical image of sackcloth and ashes. I remembered the book of Joel that called the people to tear their clothes and put on ashes because God was nowhere to be seen. Likewise, in Job, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Jonah, Nehemiah, sackcloth was a sign of grief in the face of a disaster than a response to sin. I was reminded of the Bible's rich history of repentance in the face of a disaster.

But I think when it comes down to it. And this is just me thinking about the text in its context at the end of the book of Isaiah. This is a text about the return of the exiles back to Jerusalem. Most of them have spent their entire lives in an alien space, growing up with those same tales of how their ancestry's sin led to them being forcibly removed from their land. They grew up with the idea that God had abandoned them, that even their most ardent prayers and strict observance of the law would not be enough to rouse God from God's self-imposed slumber. This text is situated in the dark dark feeling of being God-forsaken.

I cannot really relate to that. I'm a citizen of Babylon, A citizen of Rome. I've never had my land taken by others. In fact, my ancestors were a part of taking land from others. Worse, when I was a kid I was part of making other people feel like their sin would send them to hell, whereas my violence against them would send me to heaven. I feel convicted by this passage as someone who sends people away from God on account of their sin.

And so today I ask myself, how can I bring people closer to God. How can I remind people that they are loved. That God does not in-fact abandon God's people no matter how big the sin. I think this sermon is a good start.

Right now we have enough to worry about without having to add feeling sorry for ourselves. So this Advent season, let us get ready for Christ by crying out to God. Not because we are pitiful wretches unworthy of God. But because we, like the people returning from exile, are in the midst of disaster. And so we, like our

spiritual ancestors before us, cry out for relief. We know that we will have to wait many weeks for that relief to come, but it is coming. And so let us practice that hope with the act of communion, let us declare that through the taking of the bread and the cup we already are together again.