A Prayer of Hope

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*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence- **2** as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! **3** When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. **4** From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. **5** You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. 6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 7 There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. 8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. 9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people. Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation.11 Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.12 After all this, will you restrain yourself, O LORD? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?* (Isaiah 64:1-9).

1. Prayers for the Covid-19

New England Conference sends us a prayer email every day since March 2020. You can guess why the conference sends emails out to clergy and laity in the local churches. Needless to say, the prayer focus is on the Covid-19. These emails help us not to be anxious about the virus but to be patient putting our hope in the Lord.

However, although for eight months many people in New England Conference prayed for being freed from the Covid-19, the cases have increased. Some of us would raise questions. Why do our prayers not make any differences? Is there anything wrong with our prayers? Or is God listening to our prayers? Where is God anyway?

2. A Prayer of Hope

Many people throughout history raised these kinds of questions quite often. So did the Israelites. In order to understand today's scripture, Isaiah 64, we need to talk about the historical background of the Book of Isaiah, especially that of the chapters 56-66 that are called the 3rd Isaiah.

It was around 530 BCE. After the fall of Jerusalem in 587/586 BCE by Babylonian, the city of Jerusalem and the Solomon Temple were destroyed. Jerusalem was razed to the ground. Many elites were taken into captivity in Babylon. Many others fled to Moab, Ammon, Edom, Egypt, and other countries. Only a few people were allowed to remain in Jerusalem to tend to the land. The captivity of the Jews in Babylon ended in 538 BCE when the Persian conqueror of Babylonia, Cyrus the Great, gave the Jews permission to return to Israel. The Jews were held in Babylonian captivity for 48 years.

Since there was no Temple in Babylon, the Jews began synagogal worship, observed the Sabbath and religious holidays, practiced circumcision, studied the Torah, and prayed together in synagogues. Among the people some raised questions. Why does God not do anything to deliver them as God did for their ancestors in Egypt? Has God forsaken his people? Or has God no power to deliver them from Babylon? If you and I were one of their leaders at the time, what would we say to them?

Today's scripture, Isaiah 64 is a kind of Isaiah's response. His response is very interesting. It is done as a prayer. His prayer is also his message for them. His prayer begins in Isaiah 63:7. Isaiah prays, "***I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love."*** Isaiah reminds the people of what God has done in the past and praises the Lord for his compassion, love, and mercy for their ancestors in distress in Egypt. It is no question that God was their savior.

In Isaiah 64:1 and the following, Isaiah says, "***you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence- 2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence****!"* When many people doubt the presence of the Lord, thinking that God would be far away, hidden, silent, or absent, Isaiah prays that God reveals his almighty power and presence to people, especially to the nations.

In verse 4, he emphasizes that they need to wait for the Lord patiently and faithfully until God reveals himself again in the world. For those who

complain that they suffer in the foreign land, he reminds them of sinfulness of the people. Verse 6 says, "***We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth****."* Isaiah laments the long-standing patterns of sin among God's people who deserves God's punishment. Yet Isaiah does not blame God for Israel's suffering.

In verses 8 and the following, he says, "***Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. 9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people***." Isaiah makes a confession of trust in the Lord. He confirms that God is their sovereign Father. The Israelites are his children. God is also the potter and they are clay. By saying this, he is telling the Israelites that God would not abandon his people and destroy the work of his hand. Through asking the Lord to remember who they are, Isaiah believes father's forgiveness to his children and puts his hope in the Lord.

In verse 12, Isaiah asks the Lord, "***will you restrain yourself, O LORD? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely****?"* Israel's impatience has often cried, "why doesn't God do something about their trouble?" Through this prayer, Isaiah reminds the Israelites that God would do something breaking his silence and withholding his punishment on his people.

3. 2020 Thanksgiving

How was your Thanksgiving? Last year when we visited our older son Chris in CA, I requested our children to get together at Thanksgiving in Sagamore Beach this year. But as many of you did, Christine and I stayed home and celebrated Thanksgiving without our children.

I am sure many people had a quite different Thanksgiving this year. Instead of counting God's blessings and giving thanks to God, it would be much easier for us to count challenges, hardship, and troubles and complain to the Lord. Have we felt that God is far away and silent and does not care about his children? Do we feel that God does neither listen to us nor answer our prayers?

4. Conclusion

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is a season of waiting and preparing for both the celebration of the Nativity of Christ at Christmas and the return of Christ as his second coming. Advent is the beginning of the liturgical year. Although we have one more month until the beginning of

the new year 2021, today is the first day according to the church calendar. There are four themes during the Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. Today we give thanks to the Lord for giving us hope.

Isaiah chapter 64 tells us what Isaiah did when the Israelites were disappointed and frustrated in Babylon. He prayed to the Lord and gave hope to the people. In his prayer, Isaiah reminds God and the Israelites of their special relationship between them. The Israelites were chosen by God. God made a covenant with Abraham and his decedents. God has been taking care of his people in many different ways throughout their journey. Therefore, even though God seems to be silent, far away, not listen to their prayers, they need to keep praying.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul says to Thessalonians and us, "***pray without ceasing***." As long as we pray, we can hope in any situation.

5. Application

After eight month's waiting, we hear that the Covid vaccine will be available soon. Many people are excited about that news. Many people put hope in the vaccine. However, the true hope does not come from the vaccine. Jesus Christ is the reason for us to have hope. In his prayer, Isaiah prays, "***you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence****"* (verse 1). The birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prayer.

For many people, 2020 would be one of the most difficult years. However, for me and Christine, 2020 is the happiest year in our lives. You know why. Our grandson Caleb was born. He is a reminder of God's love for us.

Advent is the season of giving thanks to God for sending us his son Jesus. He is the one who was sent by God to remind us that God loves us and is with us always. He is the one who helps us to put hope in the Lord in any circumstances. Amen.