**The Potter and His Clay**

So Happy New Year to you all as we begin the new church year. Our theme here on the first Sunday of Advent is ***Waiting in Hope*** and today we light the candle of Hope.

We are in “third Isaiah” this morning, Isaiah 64:8 specifically. It is said that the first 39 chapters are “First Isaiah” from the time of the prophet himself (742-701 BCE).

The book is sometimes divided again into Second and Third Isaiah.

Gardner C. Taylor was a Black American Baptist preacher from Baton Rouge, LA. He became known as the “Dean of American preachers.” I had the privilege of hearing him preach at Fuller Seminary on the occasion of the very first Martin Luther King Day, declared by Ronald Reagan in 1986. He spoke on the parting of the waters at the Red Sea. The Song of Moses (Ex 15) and the Song of the Lamb (Rev 15).

He used to say, “How can I tell them about the third Isaiah when they have never heard of the first Isaiah?”

And having been through this long look at the path from Abraham to Jacob to Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Jonah. We have been witnesses to the long history of miracle and heartbreak, glorious revelations and sad failures of the people. And now we come to the last pages of Isaiah where the long wandering people have returned to the land of their Fathers.

The days of restoration and re-establishment of the homeland and its Temple are now at hand. The time of waiting is still upon them, but now… they wait in immense hope of better days. And we too await in the hope of the coming of Christ this Advent morning.

In the Text

Our text this morning is Isaiah 64:8:

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

So let’s explore the metaphor of clay Isaiah 64 and see how it informs our walk with the Lord in these days of Waiting in Hope.

Today pottery is a form of art. Have any of you been to Orcas Island Pottery, that remarkable pottery shop in the rain forest setting? It is the oldest pottery studio in the Pacific Northwest. There is every kind and shape of pottery creation to be found there. Cups, plates, vases, bowls, rough, smooth, kiln fired, half-baked. What a great metaphor for who we are in all our diversity as God’s creation!

We are one great big pottery shop!

What happens when the potter puts his hand to the clay? Well… first the clay has been trampled in a pit to exactly the right consistency, which sounds like a pretty apt description of 2020 (Nahum 3:14).

He shall trample on rulers as on mortar,
    as the potter treads clay. (Isa 41:25b)

However we feel about 2020, perhaps God is in all of it in a way we can’t appreciate yet. God has been treading, treading, treading out the clay.

But once that stage is complete you have this “pliable and impressionable substance” (Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, p. 155).

There is a lovely tension here. You are unique – there aren’t any other pots like you in the shop! Just like those thousands of creations at Orcas Pottery, no two are alike.

And yet…how often do we look in the mirror and say, ‘well… I certainly wish I was otherwise. I wish I was like this or that. Or that I looked like this or that. Or that I could do that rather than this.”

Here is the tension… yes you are unique but you’re still just clay. We must accept how and who we are and move on from there.

And when it comes to who we basically are, you have to realize that people don’t really change that basic God-given personality. You are the work of his hand. He doesn’t want to change your personality. He made it. He likes it. Just go with it.

Are you shy? Outgoing? Detail oriented? Big Picture type? Obstreperous old coot? A peace-maker? You aren’t going to change. Just go with it.

**From the Text**

So here is what happens among the redeemed. We yield to the Potter’s hand and He shapes you into the best detail-oriented person you can be for God’s glory. A fully redeemed detail-oriented person. And yes, God will even use your obstreperous-ness for his greater purpose.

So here is the exhortation for this the first week of Advent, just let the Potter shape you. Just yield to His hands. Just go with it. Only you can say what this means for you.

And when the Lord bids Jeremiah come to the house of the potter he says, Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel (Jer 18:6).

Here is how the Potter is shaping my clay these days.

So… God brings me to the pulpit in this last stage of my life. I never have really thought about myself Pastor in front of their name. In fact I’ve eschewed it pretty actively my whole life.

But know what? I’m loving it! Maybe my experience shows us that it is never too late to fall once again into the hands of the Potter.

Of the many things I’m loving about this role, one is the company I get to keep, and another is the growing freedom of being able to feel the Word again. I’ve always tried to be an objective academic on religion, it is kind of the professor’s responsibility.

What I learned from Rev. Taylor in the 20 minutes of my life I was in the same room with him was how one must feel the Word. You always experience this when you listen to the great preachers. Billy Graham, Martin Luther King, there have been so few really. Good preachers feel the Word in their bones and it worked its way out of the very marrow to the voice. Maybe it is the suffering. Maybe good preachers are the blues guitarists of religion. You can feel the suffering in the way they touch the strings.

I conclude with this. The most important thing in the world as we move onto the next really interesting page of our life as a community, is that we all be a pliable, impressionable substance under His hand.

The Book of Job describes the foundation of the earth…as clay to God: … it is changed like clay under the seal… that is, as when a seal is pressed on that wet pliable material it becomes an impression of God’s design (Job 38:14).

May we become that pliable, impressionable clay that God calls us to be, so his image can be molded into us.

The air is full of hope this Advent morning, hope for the exciting days ahead. Oh what labours are before us! Oh what exertions we invite with our hope! For stone upon stone the temple will be rebuilt.

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