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December 26, 2010 • The First Sunday after Christmas (A)

*Isaiah 63:7-9*  
*Hebrews 2:10-18*  
*Matthew 2:13-23*

Merry Christmas to you! Christmas, and holidays in general, are difficult times in our lives. That's precisely because we all think that they should be wonderful times in our lives. We come to them with many, often-unspoken, hopes and expectations. Perhaps we want to replicate something – a sense of the wonder of the season, the beauty of the relationships around us, or the heart-felt worship we experienced. Or we were hoping to give or receive something that blessed a particular relationship, or that made life dramatically better. In the season of Advent, and in our family preparations for Christmas celebrations, we are building up to a spiritual high point. Around now, a deep sense of post-holiday disappointment and grief often settle.

As a people, we are not very good at dealing with these kinds of emotions. In our nation's founding documents, our nation values the "pursuit of happiness" for everyone. Our culture has a sense that positive and upbeat people have a good life. It is as if we have an unspoken assumption that our attitudes, and what we do can save us from trials and troubles. It often feels like there is no room for us to grieve, or to be less than upbeat, regardless of the reason why.

Our disappointments or disillusionments often burrow deeper in ourselves, when we're not sure how to deal with them. Whether we are conscious or not, they may distance us from our connections with God, and Christ's church. It seems natural for our disappointment and grief to affect how we think about our relationship with God. For God wants us to experience Christ's love and presence at

this time of year, right? And we know God wants us to enjoy healthy and blessed relationships with our loved ones. What does it mean when none of those things happen?



From our short Old Testament lesson text, it's hard to tell that it is the beginning of a song of lament. In our verses today, the prophet Isaiah spoke words on behalf of the people as a whole. He proclaimed their beliefs about God, and the ways that God had acted in years before, bringing love and grace and salvation. Though the details aren't included, the words hearkened back to their long journey of faith with their God. They had been delivered from famine and slavery. Their God guided them through covenants, the Ten Commandments, and the prophecies. God blessed them with leaders like Moses, and prophets like Elijah, and kings like David. Amid it all, the Jewish people had felt called, and loved, and protected by the Lord. These verses of celebration and praise laid the groundwork for the community's expression of grief.

The verses that follow our passage tell a tale of the people's rebellion, and "stray[ing] from [God's] ways." (*Isa. 63:17*) They lamented that they felt forsaken by God, who had been so good to them before. Their worship, and faith life with God, had been going downhill for a while, and had hit a new low. They said, "... now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name." (*63:18-19*) It seemed like God's gracious presence had left them, that God stopped treating them like family.

The people responded as people of faith. They confessed their sins, through which they failed to walk in God's paths. (*64:5-6*) And they also prayed for God to return to old ways, and blessing them with that sacred presence and salvation again.

They asked for God to reveal himself to them. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, that the mountains would quake at your presence...” (64:1) They recalled their relationship as God’s people, and God’s creations. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” (64:8) They remembered God’s steadfast mercy, and called for that gift again. “[D]o not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.” (64:9) The people sought reconciliation with God, since they perceived a growing distance between them in their life of faith.



God speaks through the Word today, inviting us to a relationship that can weather these challenges. God calls us to remain grounded in how the Lord has been present and blessed our lives. That includes recalling the stories of God’s grace that have formed us as Christians, and sustained us over the years. Many people have Bible stories or special verses that have stayed with them over the years, and others that only sound familiar. The challenging times in life are when we can hear the stories and words anew, and hear something different in them.

Remembering stories of our salvation also means that remembering stories of how we have been aware of God’s goodness in our own lives. We, and the people closest to us, can remember how God helped to nurture us over the years, and guided us in difficult decisions, and blessed us with the presence of the Holy Spirit in hard times.

This remembering who God is to us is important – similar to how we remember Jesus’ words and actions at the Lord’s Supper, or communion. We are remembering the body and life of our Lord, just as we are re-membered (or reconnected into) as a member in the body of Christ.

As for the people of Judah, this lays the groundwork for us to confess our honest thoughts and feelings and longings to our creator. Like the chapters that follow *Isaiah 62*, it is okay for us to ask questions of our God and share our frustrations. We are welcome to turn to God, as we would a close friend or a family member, whose relationship we would not want to lose.

We do this, very aware that there are many other aspects of who God is to us that are very different. God is also: our powerful creator and giver of spiritual gifts; our wise counsel and guide; our merciful judge, hoping for justice in our world; and our loving parent and redeemer. Despite these lofty titles, God wants to remain connected to each of us, in faithful communion.

That's the big message of the Christmas season, right? God wanted to be in relationship and in communion with us so much that Jesus came to us. That's the greatest gift to us all, to last our whole lives. God is *still* with us, in the gift of Jesus' Spirit, who remains with us today. God is helping us, empowering us to live with love and justice in our world, witnessing to the faith of Jesus Christ. That beautiful life is only possible for us if we remain plugged in to God, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Please pray with me. Gracious God, we come to you in this season of celebration and disappointment, of joy and grief. Draw us closer, even when we feel disconnected and want to step away. Give us the strength to come to you when we feel lost or forsaken, or when we long for your justice or presence. Open our eyes and ears to your word and will for our lives as Christians. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.