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Isaiah 64:1-9
December 3, 2017

If only! – What might so easily have been if you God open the heavens and come down? Isaiah begins his lament wishing God is coming down to earth to make God’s presence strong among God’s people. He depicts God as the one who opens the heavens and causes a wildfire and makes the mountains quake. We experienced these natural disasters this summer. The heavens opened over Houston and Florida causing a strong tornado. Oregon and Southern California experienced wildfire, and Mexico had two major earthquakes. This terrifying power of nature reminds us of our powerlessness. It also reminds us of our need to the presence of God among us.

We will always be in need of God’s presence in our lives. Isaiah is in need of immediate contact with God. He believes that God’s presence will defeat his enemies. What was going on in the time of Isaiah? Why is Isaiah lamenting? Isaiah 64 describes a tension between the Israelites during the Persian period. The Persian Emperor Cyrus permitted the Israelites, who lived in Babylon- nowadays Iraq, to go back to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple and the wall of Jerusalem. The returnees clashed with the Israelites who remained in Palestine after Jerusalem was conquered in 587 BCE.¹ The conflict was over “questions of status, social standing, and, ultimately, political and religious authority.”² For instance, the Israelites asked “With the rebuilding of the temple, which families should serve as priests? And who has political authority?”³ The returnees considered themselves to be purely Israelites or purely Jews, but those who settled in Palestine are not purely Israelites because they intermarried with the nations

¹ Corrine Carvalho, commentary on Isaiah 64:1-9, working preacher. (Accessed on November 30, 2017).

² Corrine Carvalho, commentary on Isaiah 64:1-9, working preacher

³ Ibid.

around them. The question of who is a Jew was a big question. The identity of a truly Jew concerned the returnees.

The hostility between these two groups pushed Isaiah to lament in chapter 64 asking God to come down to protect the Israelites from their enemies. Isaiah confesses his sin and the sins of the Israelites and recalls God's good deeds toward the Israelites in spite of their sin.

A clear identity is a fundamental requirement for a healthy congregation. We have different ideas about our identity as Immanuel Lutheran Church. Some of us try to keep our heritage and mostly to keep things as they are in our church. Others want to see a new spirit in our church and at the same time to keep being proud of their heritage. For example, some people are happy to read our liturgy on TV and others are uncomfortable. I keep hearing some people saying "this is not who we are;" and others say we need to reconstruct our identity. We might not have one vision of what kind of church we believe God is calling us to become. Who we are as Immanuel Lutheran Church and what is our mission are still not clear for many of us. We do not have the same tension that Isaiah experienced within his community, but the question of our identity is strong in our church. Do we need God to come down from heaven and quake our church to show us the way that we need to follow?

God loves to work with and through people. God will love to work with us to help us to figure out who we are and how our ministry is going to be next year. For example, our synod has a Director for Evangelical Mission who is willing to help us to renew and develop our congregation. The church council voted to invite the director for evangelical mission to meet

with the church council and then the entire congregation. The synod through this director will walk with us to help us to use our resources and our gifts for the glory of God and will help us to have a clear understanding of our identity.

We are called to trust in God's love and care for us. We might not be sure about our identity as Immanuel Lutheran Church, but we need to be sure of our identity as children of God. Isaiah calls God "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). We are adopted by God our father through our baptism. We are clay, and God is the potter. We have a strong relationship with God based on God's divine love. "This relationship is part of the unchanging reality of God. God will always love us and accept us when we repent. God's love will never change even though we change. God as the potter molds us and reshapes us for a greater good. God molds us when we walk through the valley of darkness, in the same way, that a potter molds a lump of clay that has not turned out as wished. As a result of molding, we will look like a remarkable vase, the work of God's hands.

700 years later, God answered Isaiah. God came down from heaven and lived among us. Jesus Christ is God's answer to Isaiah's lamentation. Jesus Christ is our answer to our identity. He became one like us and shared with us our identity. He became a lump of clay in the hands of God the father. He opened himself to God, the father, to mold him so that we will be redeemed. At the beginning of Advent, I invited you to reflect on your identity as a child of God and as a member of Immanuel Lutheran church. I also invite you to ponder of how God can use the difficult trial in your life to mold you and to make you a better person.