

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**November 27, 2011~~Advent 1**  
**Isaiah 64:1-9**

***"Egypt. Sinai. Jerusalem. Babylon."***

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Welcome to Advent, the four weeks before Christmas during which time we wait, watch, and prepare for the coming of the Christ child. Although the decorations at the malls, and the catalogues in our mailboxes present this time as a happy, green-and-red, glitter-filled month, Advent is actually meant to be a quiet, contemplative and even somber time waiting for Emanuel, God-with-us to come. It is a time of hope and pondering, prayer and reflection-like a little Lent. If Advent is about preparing and waiting, it is important to ask: what exactly are we waiting for?

To fully understand what we are waiting for and why the waiting is so poignant, we need to go back a few thousand years and review history. To put Jesus' birth in context, we need to go back and back in the Hebrew Scriptures, all the way back to the second book in the Bible, the Book of Exodus.

Let's discern together why Jesus' coming was and is of such huge importance. Let's put Jesus' birth in the context of HIS time, and consider the implications his birth has for OUR time.

Although Genesis is the first book in the Bible, many scholars treat Exodus as the book in which the central story of redemption begins...Exodus tells the story of the Hebrew people's liberation from Egypt.

And so our story today begins with Egypt. You can picture where Egypt is in North Africa...and I think you know that for many years in ancient times, Egypt was the superpower of its day. Egypt was strong, wealthy and ruled by a King called a Pharaoh. In contrast to the powerful Egypt, the Hebrew people were not large in number nor were they powerful. The Hebrew people, also called the Israelites, were a wandering, nomadic, loosely connected band of twelve tribes.

During a severe drought in what we now call the Middle East, the Israelites sought refuge in Egypt because that region was still prospering even during the drought. The Israelites settled in Egypt and multiplied. At first, their life was good. But after a while, the Israelites were enslaved by the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh was building an empire, building cities, storehouses and pyramids, he needed slaves to provide his kingdom with bricks

made from mud and straw, he needed free labor.

Egypt was an empire, and empires are built on the backs of an exploited class of people. The Israelites broke their backs working for the Pharaoh. They were slaves: powerless, abused, and living in misery.

Now stop and think about the kingdom of God...your vision, the Bible's description...peace and justice reign, compassion and love are ever-present, mercy, forgiveness and fairness all abide. This is God's promised "Shalom," or the kingdom of God.

Egypt was the anti-kingdom. The Israelites were enslaved in the anti-kingdom. But because there is always God, there is always hope.

And so, in the Book of Exodus, God says, "I have ... seen the misery of my people..." "I have heard them crying out..."

"I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them..."

"I have come down to rescue them..."

The one refrain that echoes throughout the Book of Exodus is that God hears the cries of the poor and the oppressed and God comes to them.

The Hebrew people cry out in their suffering and God sends a shepherd named Moses to lead them out of Egypt. Moses challenges Pharaoh, there are threats and plagues, Pharaoh does not listen. Eventually the night comes when the Hebrew people gather their belongings and escape from Egypt. They cross the Red Sea, (later referred to as the baptism of Moses) and celebrate their liberation.

The Israelites then begin a journey with Moses through the wilderness that lasts for forty years. Their wanderings take them to the foot of a mountain-a mountain called Sinai. What happens at Sinai is revolutionary...not just for these former slaves, but for all of humanity.

At Sinai God speaks to the Hebrew people. God invites them to make a covenant with God-a marriage of sorts. God becomes their God and they become God's people.

There on Sinai the Hebrew people promise to love God and God alone, and to obey God's commandments. God reveals God's self as the God who liberates the oppressed. And God does not just invite the Hebrew people to be God's people, God invites them to be a "holy nation." That is important. The Hebrew people have experienced Egypt. Now on Sinai, it is as if God is saying, "You lived as slaves in the Egyptian empire, the anti-kingdom, I am now calling you to be the anti-Egypt."

That brings us to Jerusalem. Well, almost. We are almost in Jerusalem. I am

dramatically compressing history...before we reach Jerusalem there are actually generations and generations of wandering and warfare. The 12 tribes of Israelites are lost, they are attacked, they are still fairly powerless. Eventually, the young, inspired, visionary leader DAVID (as in David and Goliath) becomes the King of the Hebrew people-to their joy and relief.

King David takes charge! He unites the 12 tribes of Israel and secures the borders of the land. For the first time in centuries, Israel is safe, peaceful and prosperous. David is a brilliant King-Israel becomes a strong and powerful nation. The people whom God especially blessed are now free to be a blessing to others.

That is their mandate; that is their story; that, they believe, is their destiny.

But...but...David grows old and dies. And his son, Solomon comes to power. Israel is wealthy and strong; Solomon is shrewd and ambitious. Solomon decides to build a splendid temple to God right in the heart of Jerusalem. He oversees the building of the temple, and he fills it with gold, rare wood, carved marble, ivory and silk. Solomon's temple is huge and opulent. And how you may wonder did Solomon manage to build such a lavish temple?

It was all built by forced labor, in other words, slaves. Solomon forced workers to build a temple, and then a palace and then other enormous buildings.

Solomon has slaves. Solomon has lots of slaves.

The Bible tells us Solomon also has his slaves build "Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer." And what are those? ...military bases in strategic locations outside of Jerusalem.

Alas, Solomon uses his massive resources and wealth to build military bases to protect his massive resources and wealth. According to Scripture, Solomon accumulated 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horses. Chariots? Horses? Precisely what Pharaoh's army rode when they chased the Israelites as they fled from Egypt. Solomon also had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

Solomon broke the covenant with God. The descendants of people who once longed for freedom from Egypt built another Egypt.

The Rev. Rob Bell who recounts this entire history beautifully in his book Jesus wants to Save Christians, sums up what happened by saying:

"Jerusalem is the new Egypt. Solomon is the new Pharaoh. Sinai is forgotten."

Babylon. We now come to Babylon...again I am compressing history.

Remember when this story began in Egypt, I said, The one refrain that echoes through the Book of Exodus is that God hears the cries of the poor and the oppressed and God comes to them.

God heard the cries of the poor and oppressed in Jerusalem and God came to them. Under Solomon, Israel misunderstood God's blessing as entitlement. The people became indifferent to God and to their calling to liberation others, and they enslaved others. They acquired power, wealth and influence and they lost God.

The Hebrew people were, as Rob Bell puts it, "exiled" from their story, "exiled" from their own calling, "exiled" from the purpose God told them to fulfill. In time the Israelites were actually exiled from Jerusalem-rounded up by the invading army of the Babylonians and taken, deported, to Babylon (which is Iraq today).

The prophets predicted the exile. Amos warned them it was coming, Jeremiah bemoaned the broken covenant, Isaiah said they would be punished, Hosea said they would be banished. The prophets knew that the Israelites had lost their way, betrayed the covenant made with God on Sinai, broken their relationship with God. The prophets knew that Jerusalem would be sacked, and that the Hebrew people would be exiled to a foreign land. Be warned, beware, the prophets warned.

Amos said, "Hear this word, people of Israel, the word of the Lord has spoken against you-against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: ... See the great unrest within her and the oppression among her people. They do not know how to do right, declares the Lord, who store up in their fortresses what they have plundered and looted."

Israel had become like Egypt, the prophets predicted that Jerusalem would fall...speaking for God, Amos cried: "I will tear down the winter house along with the summer house; the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed and the mansions will be demolished, declares the Lord."

Isaiah told the Israelites that when they pray, God says, "I ... hide my eyes from you" because "your hands are full of blood." God saw the military bases, chariots and warhorses for what they were: unacceptable costs and trappings of empire.

Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah all tried to remind the people of Sinai-to bring the people back to the covenant they made with their God, to help them remember that they were

called to be the anti-Egypt, not to become the new Egypt.

Eventually everything falls apart. The temple in Jerusalem is destroyed, thousands of people are killed, and the survivors are exiled to Babylon.

In Babylon, the Hebrew people become servants. And what is a servant who is held against his will and serves against his wishes? A slave.

The Israelites are slaves, in a foreign land. Again.

For years and years while in exile in Babylon, the Israelites mourn and weep, grieve and remember, repent and long...long to return home to Israel. After many generations, the Hebrew people are finally allowed to return home. But when they return to Israel, they discover Israel is not what it used to be. The Roman Empire, NOW the superpower of the day, conquers Israel and begins a long, oppressive occupation of their nation.

The Israelites are home, but home feels like a foreign land.  
They are an occupied and desperate people in their own land...  
And so they pray and they wait.  
They dream and hope, pray and wait.

Do you understand what they are waiting for?

They are waiting for a new Moses...  
They are waiting for a new Exodus...  
They are waiting for a new King...  
They are waiting for someone to break the yoke of oppression again, someone to lead them to liberation again, someone to connect them to God again.

They are waiting...for a Messiah, for a Savior, for a Redeemer.

They are waiting...and the prophets predict that there is a new righteous reign coming under a new kind of King.

Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah,

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light:

they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.  
For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his  
shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful,  
Counselor,  
The mighty God...The Prince of Peace.  
Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of  
David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with  
justice from henceforth even forever.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

God heard the cries of the poor and oppressed and sent Jesus,  
a divine being who heard the cries of the poor and oppressed;  
Jesus: a love-filled being who befriended the weak and empowered the  
marginalized;  
Jesus: a light-filled being who confronted violence with nonviolence;  
Jesus: a Spirit-filled being who stood up to Empire and paid with this life.  
The people waited. And Jesus came.  
Jesus: poor and homeless. A warrior for peace without weapons or an army.  
Jesus: powerful though powerless...  
an anti-king to liberate those living in an anti-kingdom.

Welcome to Advent.

A time to wait, pray, and reflect...a time to remember the story, our story, of when and  
why Jesus was born.

Welcome to Advent. A time to wait as the Hebrew people did so long ago.

A time to wait, to get ready, to welcome a child who will change the world forever.

Welcome to Advent.

A time to prepare to embrace and to follow the one who sought to create God's promised  
Shalom.

Welcome to Advent.

A time to wait together to meet Jesus again for the first time.

Amen.

Jesus Wants to Save Christians by Rob Bell and Don Golden. This book had a profound influence on the writing of this sermon. I am deeply indebted to Bell and Golden for their insights and telling of history. Much of this sermon is based on their work.

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