

## **PSALM 80 verses 1 – 7**

<sup>1</sup> Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth <sup>2</sup> before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us.

<sup>3</sup> Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

<sup>4</sup> How long, LORD God Almighty, will your anger smoulder against the prayers of your people?

<sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.

<sup>6</sup> You have made us an object of derision to our neighbours, and our enemies mock us.

<sup>7</sup> Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

## **ISAIAH 63 verse 15 – 64 verse 11**

<sup>15</sup> Look down from heaven and see, from your lofty throne, holy and glorious. Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us.

<sup>16</sup> But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.

<sup>17</sup> Why, LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance. <sup>18</sup> For a little while your people possessed your holy place, but now our enemies have trampled down your sanctuary. <sup>19</sup> We are yours from of old; but you have not ruled over them, they have not been called by your name.

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!

<sup>2</sup> As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! <sup>3</sup> For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. <sup>4</sup> Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. <sup>5</sup> You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?

<sup>6</sup> All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. <sup>7</sup> No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins.

<sup>8</sup> Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. <sup>9</sup> Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins for ever. Oh, look upon us we pray, for we are all your people. <sup>10</sup> Your sacred cities have become a wasteland; even Zion is a wasteland, Jerusalem a desolation.

<sup>11</sup> Our holy and glorious temple, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned with fire, and all that we treasured lies in ruins.

## “WAITING IN HOPE”

**READING:**                    *Isaiah 63 verse 15 to chapter 64 verse 11*

The songs of lament in the Old Testament, whether found in the book of Psalms, or scattered elsewhere, are texts we often find difficult to read. A perfect example is ***Psalms 137***, where God’s people mourn in exile beside the waters of Babylon, wondering ***“how can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”*** Their grief we can handle, but not their anger, for the Psalm ends with a terrifying thought in which the infants of the enemy are dashed against the rocks. Needless to say, we usually leave out this verse when we read the Psalm publicly. Its anger is too graphic, even in this age of televised violence. Our passage of scripture from Isaiah is also a lament. Isaiah, like all God’s true prophets, not only spoke God’s Word to God’s people, he also spoke for the people to God. This lamentation is such a prayer. In it we find some pretty heart-rending stuff. ***“Where are you, God?”*** the people ask through Isaiah. ***“Why are you so silent when we’re going through our troubles? Why have you turned your back upon us? Do something!”***

Sound familiar? How many times have we said that or thought it throughout this past year? When children get into an argument, threatening to fight, they often come running to mum or dad, pleading “do something!” When that parent doesn’t act, or when they do different from what is requested, the response is (in effect) “It’s not fair!” Children also do a good job of blaming each other. “He made me do it!” When a parent gets caught in the middle, which happens a lot, either through what they do or don’t do, the response becomes, “**you** made me do it.” There’s a bit of this same sentiment in Isaiah’s lament to God for the people. ***“Why, O Lord, do you make us wander from your ways, why do you harden our hearts, so we do not revere you?” (Isaiah 63 verse 17)***. Depending on which translation we read, we may even find this statement expressed to God: ***“you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.” (Isaiah 64 verse 5, NRSV)***. But, before we criticise the Israelites of Isaiah’s day for trying to dodge their responsibility, it’s important to recognize that this prayer of the people is full of confession. The overall tone is not one of blaming God for what has happened. ***“We are yours from of old but you have not ruled over them, they have not been called by your name.” (Isaiah 63 verse 19)*** ***“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. We all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name, or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and made us waste away because of our sins.” (Isaiah 64 verses 6-7)***

Rather than blaming God for causing them to sin, the people through the prophet Isaiah are brutally honest about themselves. Maybe it’s this part that we have trouble with. It’s not just the anger expressed, but the confession made. In ***Matthew 25 verses 14-30***, we read Jesus’s parable of the talents. The ending didn’t seem fair. It may have seemed like God was a “mean, old man,” instead of someone who richly provides for our needs. One of the problems of trying to speak the truth is that so often there is a ***“Yes, but”*** to what we say. After getting across that God is not a vindictive, angry, old man, we then struggle to say. ***“Yes, but*** God is also not a nice, sensitive, modern kind of God, who tells us, “OK, that’s all right, because you’re all right and so am I.”

No, God is a holy God. Before our God, we need to be brutally honest with ourselves. We don’t stack up. All the good things we do can easily amount to no more than (to borrow Isaiah’s image) a filthy piece of clothing that hasn’t been washed in years. The apostle Paul referred to it as ***“rubbish” (Philippians 3 verse 8)***, and that’s the good stuff. There is a whole lot more “rubbish” in us if we are honest about ourselves. We recognize how deeply stained with sin we are, each one of us. In the carol “O little town of Bethlehem” there is a haunting line about ***“the hopes and fears of all the years.”*** Well, this is the “fears” part - the lamentation over the way things are, in the world and in ourselves - brutally honest with our anger and our confession. How much has really changed in 25 centuries? But what of the “hopes ... of all the years...”? Hope pops up in some pretty strange places in the Bible, often where we least would expect it. In the book of

**Lamentations**, a book of the Bible whose very title makes you think, “there is no hope,” only grief. In it we find such mournful mouthfuls as: **“the thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!** (what a depressing thought) **My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.**” Then, strangely enough, these words come next: **“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.”** (Lamentations 3 verses 19-26)

The prayer from the mouth of Isaiah for the people to God also contains hope even amid lamentation. **“For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.”** (Isaiah 64 verses 3-4) **“Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.”** (Isaiah 64 verse 8). We are like a piece of clay, Isaiah says. In the present this seemingly shapeless mass is being formed by the hands of the potter. Hope is the belief that this clay will someday amount to more than what it looks like at present. Its future shape can only be hinted at. We can dream about it, but ultimately it is in the hands of the one doing the shaping. Today, it may not look like much. Today may be the digging day, as the potter sets apart this clay from the earth that surrounds it. Today may be the kneading day, as the clay is prepared for use. Today may be the throwing day, as the clay is tossed, almost harshly, upon a hard spinning wheel - talk about disorientation. Today may be the shaping day, with both hands of the potter firmly squeezing the revolving clay, first this way, then that - pulling out, drawing up, digging in. Today may be the drying out day, being left all alone. Today may be the firing day, as the heat of the moment tempers and hardens the clay. Today may be any of these days. Hope is the belief that this present day is not the final day, that there is another day when the pottery will be finished and put to new use.

Now, to say that we are only clay, doesn't mean we are helpless, inanimate objects that are totally at the mercy of the potter - though there is some truth to that. In reality, we play a part. To wait in hope is not merely to sit idly by. Waiting in hope means becoming involved in the dream, working with the potter. There was a study done of concentration camp survivors. What were the common characteristics of those who did not succumb to disease and starvation in the camps? Victor Frankl was a living answer to that question. He was a successful Viennese psychiatrist before the Nazis threw him into such a camp. “There is only one reason,” he once said in a speech, “why I am here today. What kept me alive was you. Others gave up hope. I dreamed. I dreamed that someday I would be here, telling you how I, Victor Frankl, had survived the Nazi concentration camps. I've never been here before, I've never seen any of you before, I've never given this speech before. But in my dreams, in my dreams, I have stood before you and said these words a thousand times.”

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Traditionally, the focus of this day has been upon “Waiting in hope.” As a season in the Christian year, Advent anticipates both the birth of Christ and his long-awaited second coming. The first has already happened. As Christians, we believe that this scripture from Isaiah anticipated the coming of the Messiah, a desire fulfilled by the arrival of Jesus the Christ - his birth, life, death, and resurrection. Is this text only for a past experience, though, or is it a guide for us as we wait in hope for a new day to dawn. “The hopes and fears of all the years” are still there. We still wonder where God is, especially when rotten things happen, though we believe the Master Potter is at work. We still struggle with anger, and wonder why things happen as they do. Scripture gives us an example of how to express the anger and ask the questions and it leads us toward confession. We can't really see what tomorrow will look like. We do have hints. We can dream. Today is not all there is. Furthermore, we can call out as we wait in hope. **“Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22 verse 21)**. The hands of the potter are still at work and therein we place our hope..

# Advent Candle Ceremony

## Introduction

Each year we prepare for the coming of Christmas. We go about decorating our homes, setting up Christmas trees and buying presents. We look forward to spending time with family and friends. We also prepare in the Church as well. We sing praises to God for the birth of Jesus Christ and, this year, we will come together on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning to sing Christmas Carols and celebrate the birth of the "light of the world". This year, is a very different year. We may not all be able to meet together, but we can still enter into the spirit of preparing. Some decorations are up, many of these hoping that the bright lights will dispel the darkness of what has been an awful year. But even if we do not have our Christmas decorations / lights up, we can still prepare for Christmas. You may not have an Advent wreath, complete with the 4 candles representing hope, peace, joy and love promised and offered at Christmas. For those who can meet, a candle will be lit each week for the next four Sundays to prepare our hearts for Christmas, with the central Jesus candle lit on Christmas Day to herald the birth of the Christ child and the fulfilment of the promises of Christmas. Perhaps you may want to, carefully, light a candle at home, reading the passage below and offering the prayer.

The Advent wreath, as a circle, expresses God's eternity. The candles remind us that we are to be the light of the world, just as Jesus was the light. The central candle symbolizes the Jesus Christ who is the King of kings, and Lord of lords.

## First Sunday in Advent

The first candle we will light will help us to remember the prophets, those brave men of old who foretold of the coming of a King. Thousands of years before the birth of Christ, God sent prophets as messengers to let the world know that a new King was coming.

Isaiah wrote long ago: ***"The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."*** (Isaiah 9 verses 2 and 6)

And so we remember the Prophets of old as they faithfully proclaimed the coming of Jesus Christ. We will light the first candle at this time.

## Prayer

Father, today we begin our time of preparation for the birthday of your Son. May the light of this candle remind us that You have given hope to a people who have walked in darkness. You have spoken to us through your prophets. As we view this candle may we remember that your word is faithful and that your promises still burn brightly in our lives.