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Hilton Presbyterian Church
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First Sunday of Advent

Advent and the Arts Series
#1 *Hope in the Thick of Despair*
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37
Arthur Honegger's "Une Cantata de Noel"

What a strange way to begin Advent—with Isaiah's prayer of weeping and lament.

Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence...

The Gospel of Mark is not much better:

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light...

Out of such angst we begin the season. Isaiah and Mark's words may seem too harsh. If we aren't careful, we will rush to join most of the rest of the season's celebrators and shine the spotlight on the manger. And, doing so will result in our missing the important contemplative side of the season.

Today is the first of three Advent sermons that draw from the inspiration of artists, composers, and writers. Arthur Honegger's last composition was "Une Cantata de Noel"—"A Christmas Cantata." What makes this piece so unique—what makes it make sense—is that it was written by a Swedish composer who lived most of his life in Paris, was begun in the heat of World War II, and wasn't completed until seven years after it ended.

Some of the most profound pieces of art, literature, music, and poetry come out of the darkest moments in history. The emotions behind our national anthem were the results of Francis Scott Key's being held by the British on board a sloop while he witnessed the British's attack on Fort McHenry and his native Maryland in the War of 1812. After seeing the tattered flag still waving at the dawn of the next morning, he wrote a poem. It was attached to a John Stafford Smith hymn, better known today as "The Star Spangled Banner."

Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* came (1939) in the aftermath of our nation's Great Depression. The writings of Eli Wiesel bare the scars of the Holocaust.

More than any other factor, religion and the many facets of the Christian faith have been the inspiration for some of the finest works of art, music, poetry, and literature. Out of the deepest questions and struggles have come our finest symbols of hope and statements of faith.

The setting of Isaiah's words was an Israel *after* the Babylonian conquest (586 BCE) and *prior* to the rebuilding of the temple (515 BCE). The lament reflects Israel's disorientation in the wake of devastating exile. "Zion (the temple) has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation." (Isaiah 64:10b)

Mark's gospel was written right at the time of the destruction of this second expanded temple in 70 CE. Israel was living with occupied forces—the Roman Empire. The Jewish revolt against it was brewing and the words of our gospel text may reflect a forecast. "Keep awake, stay alert. —for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at the cockcrow, or at dawn...Keep awake." (Mark 13: 35-37)

Both Isaiah and Mark reflect a nation that is bewildered by the ugliness of a nation which has been invaded and overcome—the destruction of property, the loss of many lives, and the devastation of hope.

The questions of Isaiah are universal. "Why has this happened to me?" "Why has this happened to our country—our world?" "Why have terrorists been so destructive to the city of Mumbai, India?" "Why does my personal life seem to make so little sense at this time?" "Is God asleep at the switch?" "Is God punishing us...me?" "Does God no longer care?" "Does God exist, if such can be a part of life?"

We've all asked questions that fit into this category. We've all struggled at some point with the evils of the world, our personal shortcomings and sin, and the questionable power of our God.

Isaiah begins by reminding God of the history and the intimacy God has had with the people. Sometimes God surprised his people. Flipping through his notes, Isaiah recalls how the mountains used to quake at God's presence.

Isaiah probably takes God by surprise when he hints that it may even be God's fault that the people have fallen deeper and deeper into sin and rebellion. His statement appears to be the chicken-or-the-egg question. Was it the people who caused God to get angry and hide from the people, or did the absence of God cause the people to do unrighteous things?

Then, Isaiah's final assertion in this prayer of lament is a metaphor in which God is the potter and the people are the clay. "God, please take responsibility for the clay and mold these people into the people you want them to be."

If all we are looking for this advent season is tensile, hot chocolate, the Christmas carols you like, and a manger, then that 's probably all we'll get...and probably all we deserve. No self-reflection equals making the same mistakes over and over and staying at the same level of spiritual, emotional, and intellectual maturity. It allows us to complain about the same things without having to take any responsibility. But if we heed Isaiah's call to respond to the Potter or Mark's call to "Wake up!" and "stay alert," we may encounter the living Presence of God among us anew this Advent season.

You might discover your larger place in this world...in this church...in your family. If you open your heart to the possibility that God may have something different for you to do and turn loose from a selfishness that places comfort above integrity, a whole new world may open before your eyes.

Arthur Honegger was born in Paris in 1892 and raised in Switzerland. His parents sent him back to Paris for his formal education at the age of 21. During World War I and II he was prolific in his writing, but the coming on of World War II was most depressing for him.

In 1941 when war moved beyond the states of Europe to the involvement of Japan and the United States and with the help and inspiration of his poet-friend, he began what was to be his last work—"A Christmas Cantata." The piece contains a mixed choir, a children's choir, a Baritone soloist, organ, and orchestra. Due to the death of his good friend—the Swiss poet, Casar von Arx, whose poem was the inspiration for "Une Cantata de Noel—the work was laid aside for twelve years. It was completed and performed two years before his death in 1955.

The cantata begins with a long, sustained lower organ pedal that provides the foundation of a haunting minor key. The opening section of his cantata reflects the depression and devastation of humanity as a result of the destructive World War. After reaching a climax with instruments and voices that sounds out a cry of anguish, the mood changes as a less familiar “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” begins to breathe change and hope through the music. Finally, children’s’ voices singing fragments of German, French, Austrian, and English Christmas carols in their native language are introduced as they are woven together and even sung simultaneously including Silent Night,” “Lo How a Rose ‘er Blooming,” and “He is Born.” Symbolizing peace, harmony, and unity blended with cultural and linguistic diversity, Honegger’s music brings hope and elation to the despair left by war and conflict.

It is the epitome of hope in the thick of despair. And, so are the words of Isaiah for the true seeker of Christ this advent season. Not just the Christ Child depicted in a manger, but the living Spirit of God, miraculously present in the person of Jesus, ready to breath hope, and life, and newness to all who heed his call.

Advent is more than a time to hear promises about God. Advent is a season of attentiveness to the presence of God already among us.

Prayer

Isaiah 64:1-9

1O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
2as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
3When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
4From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
5You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
6We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
7There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
8Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
9Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.