

[PRAYER] [BLANK] Can you hear it? Can you feel it? Can you smell it? It's a new year. A brand spankin' new Christian year, filled with possibilities and hope. It is the time of preparing for birth, and rebirth, the time of admitting why we need birth and rebirth, the time when God comes to us, in the dark, in the cold, when everything seems to be set in stone, to tell us that God isn't done. God won't settle for us believing that Creation cannot have as many acts, as many innings, as many turnings of the page as it takes for us to enter God's hope.

Welcome to Advent, our Christian season of coming into God's hope, and becoming believers in God's hope. We are preparing for the coming of the baby Jesus to a humble birthplace, but we are also preparing for us becoming people who can find as much hope as God can imagine, even if we cannot imagine that hope today, or tomorrow, or for many tomorrows. Advent starts as the season of God the Creator. The story of the Holy Spirit is coming, God bringing God's power to the world. The story of Jesus is coming, God helping us to become children of God, but first, we have to put ourselves into the hands of our Creator God, whose love for us is completely fundamental, at the root of every thing, and every place, and every time.

Some people are afraid of science; why, I don't know, because all science does is show us how amazing the God of Creation has been, is, and shall always be. With every peek through telescopes, with every probe into the universe, the universe becomes more amazing, more beyond measurement, more powerful a creation than humans ever imagined. [STRINGS] When scientists consider how our universe came into being, they imagine it being like a bunch of strings beyond time and space, bumping and folding together, and, sometimes, sparking to life entire universes, like static between bedsheets and blankets. [BLANK]

God's Creation is pliable, moldable, shapeable, in ways that we can barely begin to imagine. Maybe this is why, when we look at God's creation of humans in the Bible, we see God shaping humans out of the clay of the earth. This image is true in God's way: billions of years ago, there was nothing on earth but rock, water, fire, and clay. Then a spark of life sprung from that basic stuff, and in a blink of God's time, humans sprung up from God's clay. We were shaped, expertly, by a craftsman who molds Creation into the shape of everlasting love, a day at a time.

We know this, because Christ, our perfect hope, was there when Creation was born, and Christ will be there when Creation's day is done. Our reading from Mark's gospel today reminds us that heaven and earth will pass away someday, but that the words of Jesus, the Christ, will never pass away. We are waiting for the baby Jesus, but the Christ, the Son of God, the one in whom we place all of our trust and all of our hopes, was our hope before Creation was ever born. There has never been a moment when Christ's salvation did not exist, and Christ's salvation will always be there for us, until all of Creation has passed away. In Christ, hope will always, always, be here.

So when we turn to our world, what we might call, with some cynicism, or frustration, or, even disgust, the real world, and when we look at this so-called real

world's imperfection, it's brokenness, it's refusal to be shaped into the image of God in human hands, when we look at a world that is absolutely obsessed with fear, death, destruction, and humiliation, when we look at our own reluctance or refusal to become children of God, filled with God's hope, we can remember this one important thing: God will never be done with us. Ever. Where we see brokenness, God sees opportunities for do-overs. Where we see things set in stone, God knows that stones crumble into clay at the quake of God's voice. Where we see our version of time, the ticking of a clock that marks out the precious seconds of our life, God sees time as just one more piece of clay in God's hands, part of the recipe for hope that God is shaping already for us, at this very moment.

It is this God who the prophet Isaiah spoke of more than two thousand years ago. In today's reading from Isaiah 64, the prophet is placing his trust in the mighty works of God, a God who many of his people believed had punished them for their sins. And Isaiah admits to them that, yes, they had been sinful as God's people, they had walked away from God so far that it seemed to them that God had walked away from them. They had been unclean, filthy, and wilting, unfit to be shaped by the loving hands of God into something new, and even better. The "real world" of Isaiah's people looked bleak and hopeless, as hopeless, perhaps, as some people might think our world is today.

But then, in verse 8 of today's reading, Isaiah utters God's eternal word of hope: [YET SLIDE] "Yet." That simple word is the turning point for all human hope. We can write stories of gloom and doom, stories about failure, sin, despair, and exhaustion, we can write our own limited and incomplete human stories 'till the cows come home, but it is God, and God alone, who offers us the amazing word of hope: "Yet." We see stone, broken or whole. But God tells us, you're still my clay, still the stuff from which I have made you, still my creations in my hands, ready to be turned on the potter's wheel of hope into something even better.

To finish college, I took a course in pottery to get an easy grade to meet my art course requirement. I was hardly an artist, to be sure, and many of my creations on the potter's wheel flopped to pieces in my hands. {POTTERY} But my teacher showed me how easy it was to fold the clay back into a ball, center it on the potter's wheel, and to start again. After many tries, I got something that looked a little bit like a pot. A little bit. I am sure that, if I had stuck with it, eventually I would have made a pot that was even better.

[BLANK] Even better. That's what God wants us to focus on this Advent. There is something even better coming when we end our resistance to the hand of God on our lives. There is more that we are meant to become in God's hands than we can possibly imagine.

I knew a man at my first home church in Connecticut, the husband of my church sponsor. They had known one another growing up, and they had hoped to marry, but this man, Bob, decided to take a different path in life. It was a path of self-destruction, unfortunately. Bob wound up as a skid row bum for a while in California, sleeping on

public benches. One day, when Bob was sleeping on a bench in a mall, a man walked up to Bob to hear the story of his life. That man was the Reverend Robert Schuller. You may know him from his many television broadcasts. Reverend Schuller brought to Bob the word of hope that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Bob cleaned up his act. He married his true love from his childhood, and they became model church people, and model citizens. They lived a beautiful Christian life.

One day, when I was in a Bible study with Bob, we were all asked to give one word that described God. When was Bob's turn, he couldn't wait to offer his word for God: "potter." Bob knew that his life had become clay in God's hands, and that everything that could be good or better in his life would come from being shaped by God. And so it was. Not long after that, Bob was told that he had a very advanced form of cancer. Sunday after Sunday, Bob would come up during the offering, and offer himself up for prayer with our Pastor. Bob wasn't asking for things to turn out his way. He was asking for the faith to have things turn out God's way. Hope is not always about the story turning out the way that we want it to. But hope is always about the story turning out even better, in God's loving hands, being shaped in ways that we cannot imagine.

Welcome to the advent of God's possibilities. Whatever your life is like now, God has something even better planned for you, through faith in Jesus Christ. Whatever you think cannot be changed, God is ready to change. Whatever you think is misshapen in your life, and couldn't possibly fit into God's plan, God is ready to fold you back into the body of Christ, and to shape you into the beautiful, fresh, spirit-filled way that God has prepared beforehand to be our way of life. Get ready for the coming. Get ready to become. Get ready to be shaped even better. Amen.