

Isaiah 64: 1-9
Mark 13: 24-37
November 30, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

For Christians, Advent is not a “feel good” season. Yes there are many pleasurable traditions and foods and sharing of gifts; but this is a cultural festival which has nothing to do with this sacred season. For practicing Christians—and I mean that in the dual sense of being intentional about *practicing* our faith, and *practicing* to become more faithful to Jesus—Advent is a *purple* season.

The color purple has two primary associations for Christians. It is the color of royalty. The color purple announces that while we are citizens of the United States of America, our highest loyalty and obedience belongs to the one we call King of Kings and Lord of lords. Jesus is our Ruler and we are called to obey him even if our obedience puts us at odds with the country we love. Purple acknowledges that Jesus is Lord of the whole world and so his priorities transcend our national priorities. Because Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth we are suspicious when nations claim to represent the perfect will of God. We may not agree about who God *is*; but the color purple reminds us clearly who *we* are *not*. We are *not* God, our country is *not* God. For any person or people to claim to be God is blasphemy. The color purple reminds Christians around the world that we have more in common with our sisters and brothers of other nations than with our particular country of origin. In the Kingdom of God there are no nations; just citizens of one realm ruled by one Ruler.

But the color purple also has another meaning. For practicing Christians purple is associated with a season of penitence. Penitence is the active practice of honest reflection. It

involves assessing how closely our lives as individuals and communities reflect our values and habits as people of faith. Is what we say we believe actually demonstrated in our lives? When Jesus returns will he find us to be people who, however imperfectly, tried to live a life that would please him? Will we have cared for the people he cared about? Will we have sought to conform our lives to his life? Will our lives have pointed beyond ourselves to Jesus and his glory? The color purple in this sense expects that, if we are honest, the answer will be “not entirely.” The color purple calls us to admit that we not lived up to our high calling of making the love of God in Jesus visible to the people around us. As a church we must admit that sometimes our behavior is hard to distinguish from the world around us.

Thus we have a season of penitence which seeks to identify those areas where our lives fall short of the high calling of Christ and we get honest about it. We don't try to justify our behavior. We don't blame others. We come before God and admit we have gone astray and ask God through the grace of Jesus to redirect our path so that we do more completely express the love of God in Jesus to the world.

In addition, we bear the sorrow of living in a world that in so many ways is heedless of the call to follow Jesus with humility and reflection. We witness the tragedy in Ferguson, Missouri and struggle with feelings of anger and sadness. Because we represent the King of kings and are ambassadors of his message of love our hearts break at precisely the places where his heart broke in scripture. We feel the brokenness of this broken world and sometimes we are brought to tears of sorrow and rage as Jesus was brought to sorrow and rage. The color purple expresses our profound experience of the gulf between the world as God intended it to be and the world as it is. We could bury ourselves in things and righteous opinions and so

separate ourselves from the pain of the world. We could blame the poor for their suffering and excuse those who have power; but we don't because we are Christians. Christians follow the path of Jesus who did not stand apart from human suffering but entered into it—literally with both feet.

These reflections are inspired by this morning's passages from scripture. They are both "purple" passages. How can we not hear the anguish of Isaiah as he sees the collapse of God's people who have been scattered by their rejection of God and their worshiping of the idols of prosperity and power? How can we not here his cry of sorrow and rage at the corruption of God's people and yet compassion for their suffering?

*O that you would tear open the heavens
and come down so that the mountains
would quake at your presence!*

This is the cry of all shades of the color people. It carries the recognition that Isaiah is powerless in the midst of the moral and social devastation of the people of Israel. It is the acknowledgement that God is the only power to set things right. Even Isaiah knows he is part of the problem for no one, not even Isaiah is righteous. All have sinned. All have helped create this spiritual and political disaster. Only God can set things right. If only God would come down and sort things out and put everything in its proper relationship!

O come, O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear!

In Advent we sing these words with a depth that only those who are open to the sorrow and injustice, the fear and the hatred of the world can. For Advent people, Isaiah's cry is our cry. It is also the cry of the one who responded to Isaiah's cry and came down to set things right.

But how are we to hear the passage from Mark? Here we receive another nuance of the color purple—the promise that the King will return. Many people hear these words and picture an angry Jesus coming to judge the world with strict justice. The good people will be rewarded and the bad people will be punished. The earth itself will be destroyed and history will come to an end. We live in a world where the vast majority of people think the idea of Jesus return is a dramatic story meant to scare people into submission. They reject the whole idea and so adopt the philosophy of living for the pleasure of this life only. Those who have the resources can enjoy life and those who can't are just out of luck. Then there are a number of vocal folk who believe that not only is Jesus returning but we can actually guess when. Every few years we have a spasm of panic. Many literally head to the hills.

Yet Jesus himself tells us not to worry about what is hidden in the heart of God. Instead we are called to live faithfully day by day following Jesus, our eyes on him alone. As we do this—as we prepare to receive again the wonderful news that God was born human in a cow stall in Bethlehem, and as we follow him who called women and men to learn and live his life, as we follow him to the cross and the empty tomb, we may find the darkness lifting. We may find our step a bit lighter, our sense of the opportunity to sever more joyful. We may become more impressed with what God in Jesus has done and can do in us and through us than with the darkness and despair of the world.

And all because of this purple season of Advent. Amen.