

“Longing for Something More”

Isaiah 64:1–9

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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In his book *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner says this.

Christianity is mainly wishful thinking. Even the part about Judgment and Hell reflects the wish that somewhere the score is being kept.

Dreams are wishful thinking. Children playing at being grown-up is wishful thinking. Interplanetary travel is wishful thinking.

Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes on.

Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it. (p. 96)

“Wishful thinking” is a term we often view in a negative way, somewhat like the term “myth,” but in both cases it depends on how we define the term. A myth can be something that is not true or something that is true in the deepest sense, just perhaps not literally. Wishful thinking can be baseless hope or the deep kind of human hope that keeps us alive, even in the midst of great struggle. Buechner is right, much of Christian faith is a kind of wishful thinking — in the latter sense. This season of Advent, which we begin today, certainly is.

If we don’t like the sound of wishful thinking, let’s say this is a season of longing for something more. We long for the birth of a Messiah, not just in a Bethlehem stable, but into our hearts and world. The prophet Isaiah longs for God to tear open the heavens and come down in such an obvious way that the mountains will quake and fire will be kindled. Even Jesus’ apocalyptic words, recorded in Mark, express a kind of longing — for a day when God will intervene miraculously and set things right. We long for something more than our current experience.

Let's start with COVID-19. I long for the day when people will gather safely in this sanctuary, when we don't have to preach and sing to cameras only, though we are grateful for this technology and the people helping us to use it. I long for a time when we can hear each other singing, affirm our faith together, embrace one another in love. I long to eat food I have not cooked and with other people around the table.

We all long for children to get back to school with all of their friends safely present; for everyone to get back to work without the fear of ending someone's life simply by breathing next to them; for movie theaters, basketball gymnasiums and museums to be packed and buzzing with life. We may not have been taken into literal exile like the ancient Israelites, but it feels like we have been experiencing a kind of exile and thus we know something of what they felt, we long for a better day.

In like manner, we long for a more just society where the color of a person's skin does not affect his/her safety and wellbeing, ability to get a good education or job, access to healthcare or experience of any other significant part of normal life. We long for a time when there are differences but not divisions, disagreements about how to address certain agreed-up challenges but not disputes over basic facts, more passion for what *we* believe than hatred for what *they* believe, more love than fear. And in our individual lives, many of us hope for a renewal of our faith that has grown stagnant, the healing of a relationship that is broken, comfort in our sorrow. We wish, hope, long for many things.

The question is — is there anything to our longing? Is there any reasonable basis for hope? We can wish for whatever we want, but wishing does not make it so.

Well, let's consider this question in light of the ancient Israelites' experience, as addressed by the prophet Isaiah. We don't know much about the identity of this prophet whose words are recorded near the end of the book of Isaiah other than that most scholars think his ministry takes place in the late sixth century BCE. So, he speaks near the end of the Babylonian exile or as the people are beginning to return home. In other words, he is not the same prophet who is called in the year King

Uzziah died (Isaiah 6:1-8). This prophet ministers to people who are experiencing a great deal of anxiety for at least a couple of reasons.

First, they have the memory of being exiled because of their disobedience to God. They believe God has abandoned them to the consequences of their own behavior and thus given them up to judgment, which meant being conquered by a foreign oppressor.

Second, they have an unknown future. Cyrus, the leader of the rising Persian Empire, has allowed many of the Jewish people to return home, but what awaits them? Economic uncertainty, the daunting task of rebuilding the temple and the haunting question of whether their relationship with God will be restored even when the temple is rebuilt.

Thus, with a troubling past and an uncertain future, the people are anxious and the prophet is right there with them.

So, he longs for intervention. *“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,”* he cries out to God, *“so that the mountains would quake at your presence — as 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!”* The prophet isn’t asking for a little comfort. He is looking for fire in the sky! He is longing for a dramatic intervention to set things right and put the other nations — “the enemies that threaten us” — in their place.

Yet, this is not an act of desperation, a weak form of wishful thinking. The prophet’s longing is based on his awareness of how God has helped the people in the past. “When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,” he says, “you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.” Whether he is thinking of the Red Sea parting or some other detail of Israel’s history, the prophet’s longing is based on what God has done before. So, he says with boldness, “The future is unknown. We need some clear sign to let us know you are still there, to assure us that you still care; help us like you have helped us in the past!”

So, the prophet’s longing is based on his awareness of what God has done before, but hidden in his plea for help is something else — an incredible sign of faith. The prophet clearly trusts in God’s ability to help, but more than this, he trusts in God’s desire to help. Despite all that has happened, despite all that the people have done, all of their

disloyalty and sin, he believes that God is still willing to help them because they are still God's people and God still loves them.

Our reading ends with these words, "*You are our Father, our loving Parent; you are the potter and we are the clay. Do not be angry with us forever, for we are your people.*" The reading ends not with a call for intervention but with a statement of faith. "We are still your people. So, I will dare to ask for healing and forgiveness!"

The message for us is that there is something to our longing for more, there is a basis for hope, there is truth to set us wishing — we remember how God has helped us in the past, and we believe that God still loves us, we are still God's people, and thus we can be assured not only that God is able to help us but that God wants to do so.

We don't know exactly how God's aid will come or when. When Jesus speaks of his final coming with great power and glory, he says that even he does not know when it will happen. But we can trust deep down that God will help us in some way and thus our longing is not futile — our longing for normalcy, peace, justice and healing is not futile.

In a commentary on Isaiah 64, Christopher Davis, a professor of pastoral ministry and preaching at Memphis Theological Seminary, tells a personal story that illustrates the nature of Divine Provision and thus the wisdom of human hope. When his first child, a son also named Christopher, was very young, he took him to Toys-R-Us in the midst of the busy Christmas season and somehow his son got separated from him. His fatherly instincts stirred an immediate sense of panic as he looked up and down one aisle after another but could not find his son.

Davis kept his focus enough to find a security guard and he asked if the store had security cameras. It did. So, he asked if he could look at the monitors and the guard said he could. After looking all around the store, they finally located young Christopher who was crying and clearly in a state of distress. Professor Davis asked if the store had an intercom. The guard said it did. So, he got on the intercom and said, "Christopher, it's Daddy, don't move. I can see you although you can't see me. Stay where you are. I'm coming." The boy calmed down and the father quickly went to him and all was well.

Davis suggests that when we can't see how God is at work, when we can't see God at all, God sees us, and speaks to us a word of assurance. Then, God comes to us in one way or another, providing what we need most — often simply the knowledge that we are not alone and the strength to endure. Our longing is not futile.

Whenever I think of wishing for things, that old song from *Pinocchio* sung by Jiminy Cricket comes to mind.

When you wish upon a star
Makes no difference who you are
Anything your heart desires will come to you

If your heart is in your dream
No request is too extreme
When you wish upon a star
As dreamers do

Fate is kind
She brings to those who love
The sweet fulfillment of their secret longing

Like a bolt out of the blue
Fate steps in and sees you through
When you wish upon a star
Your dreams come true

Advent longing is a bit like this. It is God who steps in, not fate; and only our deepest needs are met, not all of our desires; but wishing on a star, especially the star of Bethlehem, is not futile. Longing for something more, something better, something noble and good lies at the heart of our faith and this season. There is work to do as well, preparations to make, but it all begins with longing, with a deep and abiding trust in God's ability to provide something new. O that God would tear open the heavens and come down and dwell among us again! Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee! Amen, let it be so!