



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Yet”

Isaiah 64:1-9

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Columbus, OH

Naomi Shihab Nye is an American poet. Her father is Palestinian, her mother of German ancestry. Several years ago, she found herself wandering around the Albuquerque Airport. Her flight had been postponed for several hours. She heard an announcement. “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.” She hesitated to respond. These are not easy times for Arab Americans and airports. But she went. It was her gate as well. When she arrived at the gate, she saw an older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. “Help,” said the gate agent. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.”

Picture the scene. A wailing Palestinian. Nervous airline employees. A language breakdown. Growing unease among the other travelers. As they all wait for a flight that may or may not take off. What a mess.

Our text for this morning is written for such a time. Chapter 64 is part of the third movement of the book of Isaiah. The exiles have returned from Babylon to find Jerusalem’s temple destroyed and their homeland in ruins. Imagine returning to your home to find it burned down. Imagine coming back to your hometown after a hurricane or flood. The exiles come home full of hope and expectation and, no matter where they look, they see devastation. What a mess.

Which isn’t a bad description of this particular moment in our national life and the life of the world. Things are kind of a mess. Not going well. In Egypt, a little over a week ago, over 300 men, women and children were gunned down as they gathered for weekly worship. In South Sudan over a million people face starvation. Closer to home, we hear story after story of prominent men accused of sexual harassment, sexual misconduct and, in some cases, sexual assault. Is this something new? Oh, no. It’s just that it’s coming to light. People are telling the truth. This particular moment is awkward and painful and ugly and I know I want to move through this as quickly as possible and get to the healing and hopeful part.

We want hope so badly. Ta-Nehisi Coates is an author who has written extensively on race relations in the United States. His 2015 book *Between the World and Me* won the National Book Award and spent 78 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list. He was recently interviewed by Stephen Colbert.

“You’ve had a hard time in some interviews expressing a sense of hope in this country,” Colbert said. “Do you have any hope tonight for the people out there, about how we could be a better country, we could have better race relations, we could have better politics?”

“No,” Coates replied. “But I’m not the person you should go to for that. You should go to your pastor. Your pastor provides you hope. Your friends provide you hope.” This wasn’t the answer Colbert was looking for. “I’m not asking you to make [stuff] up,” he said. “I’m asking if you personally see any evidence for change in America.”

More sermons can be found online at <http://bspsc.org/AboutUs/SundayMorning/Sermons.aspx>

Coates shot back, “But I would have to make [stuff] up to actually answer that question in a satisfying way.”¹

Coates is not hopeful about race relations in the United States. Not at all. He has sound reasons for that position rooted in his understanding of history and his personal experience. He said if you are looking for hope, go to your minister. O.K. But maybe not during the season of Advent. Advent is built on the assumption that things are not the way they are supposed to be. Advent is clear about that. If there is a way forward, it begins with a brutally honest assessment of how bad things are. How bad things are out there. How bad things are inside of us.

I have been on jury duty the last two weeks. Monday afternoon, I was interviewed by a prosecutor as a prospective juror. He was asking all of us about how we determine if someone is telling the truth. He turned to me and said, “In your profession, I bet people lie to you all the time.” I responded, “No more than they lie to themselves.” I don’t think that was the answer he was anticipating.

It was mid-December about ten years ago. He left a message on the church voicemail at 5 p.m. on a Friday. “I’d like to come in and talk to you,” was all he said. After much phone tag, we set a time to meet.

He came into my office and sat down. I have learned over the years that it is not helpful to guess why people have come to see me, so I waited for him to tell me why he was there. But first I asked him, “So, how are you doing?” “Fine. Good. Excellent, in fact. Yep, everything’s good. Really, really good.”

“Oh,” I said. And then I stopped talking. I waited. And I waited some more. Silence is a powerful thing. It can do strange things to people. As we sat in silence, I looked at his face and slowly, oh so slowly, the smile he had been wearing crumbled and a different face emerged. And then he began to talk. And this time, he couldn’t stop talking. Because so much was going wrong in his life. He was going to lose his job and his marriage was strained to the breaking point and one of his kids was out of control.

“Wow,” I said. “How are you doing with it all?” And this time, I got an honest answer. He shared his fears and his doubts and his sadness. And he told me how he’d been trying so hard for so long to pretend that everything was OK and he just couldn’t do it anymore. And then he said, “I’m surprised at how good it feels to say all of this out loud.”

No surprise, that conversation took place during Advent, the season of honesty. Advent is a time to tell the truth about what is really going on in our lives and in our world. Believe it or not, that moment is when hope begins.

I recently had a conversation with a life-long friend. We talked about her brother. She has spent much of her adult life reaching out to him, showing up in his life, taking an interest in his work and family and that interest and care have never been returned. And she blames herself for not being a better sibling. I suggested a different way of looking it. “Maybe he’s missing something inside him,” I said. “Maybe he doesn’t have the capacity for connection and compassion.” It sounded so harsh as I said it but watching her face as she listened made me think I might be right. She said, “If I see him that way then maybe I can let go of guilt and anger and love him as he is instead of wanting him to be different.” Her voice sounded... well... hopeful.

Back to Isaiah. The first two-thirds of the passage are disheartening. The prophet accuses God of keeping a low profile, ignoring the pain of the people. At the same time, he names the ways in which the people are broken and messed up—their own worst enemy.

¹ <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/10/3/16409194/ta-nehisi-coates-stephen-coltbert>

Isaiah does not indulge in optimism. The prophet is clear about everything that is going wrong. And then he says this one word. “Yet,” he says. “Yet” is a connecting word that lets the listener know there is more to come. The story isn’t over. Advent is clear about just about how bad things are. It’s also clear about the way forward. God is not done with us. We are not done with God. God’s work—our work—is not complete.

Isaiah writes that we are the clay and God is the potter. It’s a beautiful way of saying that we belong to God our creator and we are all in God’s hands. And we can change. We who are clay are malleable, pliable. We can be shaped and reshaped by the hands of our loving Creator. Because we belong to God. In fact, that’s how this passage ends. We are all your people, the prophet says. All of us are God’s people.

It’s time to go back to Gate 4A in the Albuquerque airport. Nye went up to the wailing Palestinian woman, put her arm around her and began talking to her in Arabic. Here’s how Nye remembers the next few hours:

The minute she heard any words she knew... she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, “You’re fine, you’ll get there, who is picking you up? Let’s call him.” We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her—Southwest.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for fun. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions.

Nye continues

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag—and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie. And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere. And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.²

Not everything is lost.

If you were looking for a more hopeful ending than that, come back another time of year. Remember, there is no cheap optimism to be found in this season of Advent, this season of waiting.

We are at the gate with one another—all of us. Waiting for the flight to leave. Waiting for things to get better. Waiting for God to return to make things right.

² <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/gate-4>

We get to decide how we wait.

Occasionally, even in airports, we catch glimpses of the way things can be. The way things should be.

Not everything is lost.

Amen.