

**When God Seems Absent**  
**Isaiah 64:1-9**  
**December 3, 2023**  
**Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church**  
**Grand Rapids MI**

Earlier this week I heard an old familiar song by Billy Joel. You may know it, it's called "We didn't Start the Fire". Billy Joel wrote the song after a chance meeting with Sean Lennon, the son of John Lennon. In the course of their conversation, he realized that each subsequent generation that comes along sees the world getting worse. He wrote this song in 1989 when he was turning 40.

If you are familiar with the lyrics a little bit, you hear a listing of famous people and events both good and bad in each stanza, separated by a chorus that says:

We didn't start the fire.

It was always burning, since the world's been turning.

We didn't start the fire.

No, we didn't light it, but we tried to fight it.

The song lists a total of 117 major events between 1940 and 1980. The song grows in intensity as it progresses, reminding us of the growing urgency to try and fight the increasing madness around us.

Hard to believe that the song came out nearly forty years ago. Now a group called **Fall Out Boy** has reproduced the song this year with an updated list of people and events reminding us again that the world keeps turning and the world keeps burning and we all need keep trying to fight it.

Although the song from Billy Joel does not mention God, it is a modern-day lament very similar to the lament we read in Isaiah 64. A lament is a mournful and expressive form of prayer. Like some of the grieving people we may have seen in Gaza and Israel over the recent attacks there. A lament holds nothing back from God and does not

yield to polite discourse. Lament is raw, pain-filled, and laden with emotional response. We hear in Isaiah's words his anguish wondering where God is amid such pain. He is distressed with the horrors of war, begging God to come and do the unexpected. He even begs God to rip open the heavens and come down and intervene. This term "to rip open" is the same term used when one tears their garment as an expression of repentance. Like we hear in Joel 3:12 "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing." Isaiah is asking God to repent of God's complacency and engage in the struggle.

These are timeless words, written after the return from the Babylonian exile in 586 BC. Today we place these words in Advent as we wait once again for God's inbreaking into our world. The poet asks God to do the unexpected. To come down to earth and be with us to share in our struggle and to feel our pain. That unexpected act of God to walk among us we find in Jesus. Born of an oppressed people, in an occupied land, struggling to find safety and shelter. Yet we could be writing these words still today, as we see yet another genocide occurring in another occupied territory. Not just in Gaza but also in Congo, Sudan, Myanmar, New Guinea and several more. We hear the cries of mothers seeking their children under the rubble. We watch the desperate attempts of fathers and strangers alike running with lifeless bodies in their arms seeking help. We share in their tears begging our governments to intervene and stop the madness.

As we begin our Advent journey, we may identify with Isaiah's words as we too struggle to understand why God is silent. We see the fires of hatred and evil grow and know that this is not the first time this fire has burned. But we join in the chorus, "We didn't start the fire. No, we didn't light it, but we are trying to fight it."

According to Rev. Cheryl A. Lindsey, writer of Sermon Seeds she writes, "In the progression of this prayer of lament, the prophet reminds God of their awesome deeds of the past. In reminding God, Isaiah also reminds himself and the people of the truth

of God. Remembering what God has done assures us of what God can do once again. That's the power and distinctiveness of lament, which may be inappropriately conflated with mere complaint. Lament includes and often begins with complaint. But, that complaint is situated in a larger story and understanding."

We don't just stay in the present complaining, we look back to what God has done in the past to gain hope for what God can and will do again as we rise up in hope.

In today's reading we see a glimmer of hope in the final verses.

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.

Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,  
and do not remember iniquity forever.

Now consider, **we are all your people.**

Even though earlier the writer felt like filthy rags, dead leaves, and dust, we remember we are the people of God, all of us. As we remember our shared humanity, our hope is renewed. When we remember that we are in God's hands and God is at work in our lives, our hope grows. Hope is vital because it lifts us out of despair and into action. Hope sustains us in our struggle to seek peace, joy and love as we continue on the Journey of Advent toward Christmas and the coming of Christ.

As we begin our Journey through Advent, heavily burdened with the troubles of this world and troubles within our own family. May our hearts be renewed by hope. Hope in a God that hears the cries of the distressed, who breaks in and lives among us. Hope in a God that shares in our suffering and comes to bring comfort and joy once again.