

Help!

Text: Isaiah 64: 1-9

Several years ago, a friend of mine underwent a rather serious mid-life crisis. *He* didn't think that was what it was. Instead, he thought he was finding his true self, a self to which everybody else hadn't paid sufficient attention. Now, this newly invented sense of self led to, among other things, an act of marital infidelity on his part, although he tended to think of it as the expression of a new, exciting lover deep inside that had been bottled up. He thought other people's lack of interest, particularly his wife's, in his intense self-interest in remaking himself was simply non-supportive, jealous, and repressive. In reality, however, if his friends didn't say much, it may well have been because they were trying hard not to show their embarrassment.

Now, at the time that he was finally forced to deal with some of the consequences of his actions he came to me as the college chaplain for advice and help. At first this invitation to talk sounded promising and I thought I could help. I wanted to help. Yet, it turned out to be one of the strangest such sessions to which I have ever been party. Rather than laying out his story, telling me what life had been like for him recently, and then letting me ask questions to help him work through his confusions and competing interests and values, rather than letting me encourage him about the fact that he didn't need or want to do what he was doing, he pretty much coached *me* through our whole time together. He tried to direct both the questions he thought I should be asking and the advice I might give. Needless to say, all the coaching was aimed at being supportive of his self-destruction. I learned later that when he had gone to marriage counseling with his wife, he had done pretty much the same thing to the marriage counselor. He had no intention of changing; he just wanted to help the counselor to get his wife adjusted.

The effect, of course, was that ultimately he didn't get the advice, and he didn't get the

help he needed, nor did he get the support he desperately wanted. He blocked it effectively from the very beginning. He wouldn't listen and he couldn't hear the very things he needed to hear. And hence he continued down a path that made him not more open and vibrant, a greater lover of humanity, which is what he thought he wanted, but one that increasingly alienated him from others. He couldn't understand why they didn't see the brilliance of the plan of his self-reinvention.

The experience opened my eyes wide to what I have discovered to be a very persistent human trait. In the ensuing years, I have seen this sort of thing several times, that is, people who really need help but whose very condition and problems make it very difficult for them to hear what needs to be done, much less to do it. It is particularly obvious in the case of those who have severe mental health issues. It is what comes with the territory of severe mental health issue and it may well be what "crazy" means. Perhaps the best illustration I can give was of a man with whom I spent a great deal of time in a previous parish. He had suffered for over thirty years from severe bi-polar disorder. When I knew him, he was in a severely depressed state. There wasn't much that one could do to help him, or to get him to do anything, as any suggestion given to him was met by an immediate and detailed response of why it couldn't possibly work, and why it was over with him, whatever "it" was. Finally, after a social worker and I convinced his family to get him into an assisted living home, I went to visit him. Back on medication, he was much better. But as I left, he said he had something I probably should do something with. He somewhat sheepishly handed me a one pound coffee can. When I opened it, I found that it was filled to the top with anti-depressant medication. There were literally hundreds of pills in it. As it turned out, he had been saving them out from his daily dose because during the last several years he was so worried that he would be cut off from his medication that he thought he should save them

against that day. Needless to say, doing that had been one of the chief sources of his problem.

That is the most obvious sort of case, but it isn't just crazy people who refuse the help they need, and who consequently slide deeper and deeper into their problems. Other people do it all the time.

Now, I bring this up for a very simple reason, namely, this rather common phenomenon helps explain an otherwise very confusing thing that the prophet Isaiah says in today's Old Testament lesson. For he says, "But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed."

Most commentators on this passage, both ancient and modern, have assumed that there is something wrong with this text, and that it is turned around. After all, it makes a great deal of biblical sense to say that we sinned and *then* God got angry. It doesn't seem to make sense to say that God got angry first, and then we sinned. And yet, the examples I just gave you do seem to make sense of it. For frequently, when things are not going well, when the sun is not shining brightly on us, we in response make some rather spectacular mistakes. When God hides his face, and remains hidden, we pretty regularly don't and *can't* help ourselves, and the harder we try, the worse we seem to make things and the worse things get.

Isaiah's claim that this is the way it is, is hardly unique in the Bible. The psalmist says in psalm 73: "When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you." And he also says in psalm 104: "When you open your hand, all are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take their breath away, they die and return to their dust."

Now, it is not at all clear *why* God would get angry or hide his face, just as it is not clear why he let Job who was righteous suffer the way he did. Perhaps this anger is not really anger but

the way that we sometimes experience the hiddenness of a God who “dwells in light inaccessible, whom no one has seen nor can see” and whose ways are beyond us. If we depend on God, and God is hidden, we might be justified in calling that anger simply because of the way that we experience it. Perhaps, in that respect, too, it is what we have to say theologically in the face of what is otherwise called natural evil, or what we have to say in the face of the evil that is launched into human life when there are inexplicable accidents. But whatever this side of it is, the effect is the same: we are rarely patient; instead, we act ignorantly and like beasts, we are dismayed, and we get deeper and deeper into trouble, and we can’t and don’t look for help.

Not that it is always even our fault. For this is the nature of evil itself, to which we may or may not intentionally contribute. We would like to think that evil is simply somebody’s fault, and that blame and punishment, and stupidity and stubbornness and dismay is directly related and proportioned to the sin and to the person who committed it. But it isn’t always this way; in fact, it is rarely *just* this way. Often the evil that one does is visited upon the children of the father unto the third and fourth generations; often it is like a fungus that has a life of its own, that has a capability to spread where it was not first planted. Evil as we know it in this world has, surprisingly, the power of making even the innocent guilty. That is the dark mystery of evil.

Think here simply about what violence does to people. Rather frequently, as we know too well, there are innocent victims. Sometimes they are innocent bystanders, sometimes they are the victims of accidents, biological, genetic, social, or they are victims of just plain old car or household accidents. Yet, once touched by force and broken by it, even for a moment, some of these innocent victims do not remain unscathed inside. Often some victims, who deserved *nothing* of what happened to them, become very unhappy people, and many remain broken. Many become burdens on their families, and soon self-loathing creeps in, and anger at God and

humanity becomes the lot of their life. They become objects of resentment, and then the caretakers who resent them become worse people. As Simone Weil once put it, they become *afflicted*. But then they, too, start acting out. They become angry and resentful; they want to hurt people as much as they have been hurt. In such cases, the evil of the violence does not remain with the perpetrator. It gets passed on from generation to generation. It takes on a life of its own, and it touches the innocent and makes them sinners. *That* is the great mystery of evil. Evil is not a philosophical mystery, a puzzle we can't figure out, not knowing why God or anybody else would allow it. The real mystery of evil is its ability to make even the innocent complicit and capable of spreading its contagion. The great mystery is "Why me?"

And often the worst of it is the paralysis that we experience in such cases with respect to asking for, and accepting help. Sometimes that happens because we are proud, and the worse we get, the prouder we become. Sometimes it is because we are deluded about the state of our souls. Sometimes it is because we are depressed and beaten. But in any case, we are stuck if we can't ask for help, and can't open ourselves to receive it.

Understand how deep a problem that is spiritually. Martin Luther once spoke about the idea of temptation with respect to the popular superstition that the devil was the one who tempted us to do evil. He denied that the devil actually tempts us to do bad things; rather, he thought, temptation lay somewhere else. Luther said: "The devil doesn't have to tempt us to do evil, because we already belong to him. What he tempts us to do is to deny Christ, who is the only one who can help."

In order to understand what exactly he means, consider simply this example. For some years I was on a presbytery administrative commission dealing with a church that had some truly disturbing and ugly problems within the congregation. But the most troubling incident that I can

recall was really a rather simple one. One woman, who had been actually been helpful in trying to bring proper order to the church's governance, finally told the pastor that she could not take communion with those on the other side of the argument. Now, what was most troubling about her refusal was not her lack of love for her enemies; even if that needed work, it was understandable, particularly if you knew her enemies. Rather what was most troubling was that she was refusing the very help that God provides to heal us and make us whole. For communion is not a celebration of our unity, and it is therefore not hypocritical to take it alongside our enemies; it is an instrument of God's grace that may be the only help we have to keep us from continually hurting ourselves and our enemies. Refusing it, refusing God's grace, is to refuse God's help and to give oneself wholeheartedly to the very thing that destroys us.

So what is the solution to the evil that beset us, to the sin that clings so closely?

Isaiah spells it out two verses later when he says: "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." What that means is simply that between us and God there is a deep and special relationship. By virtue of creating us out of nothing, and by virtue of his own Spirit keeping us in being, and by virtue of making us in his own image, God does not stand afar off and simply watch us. God, even when hidden, remains at the very center of our being, and sometimes because we are so bad at self-examination, being at the very center of our being may be why God is hidden. The problem is that we never seem to look for him there. But in any case, Isaiah simply reminds us that God is our Father, and that God therefore cares because he has chosen to be a part of us. Therefore, we have reason to hope that even though we often reject the help that we need, that the one who helps us is never far from us, and can never forget us. We simply need to wait and to hope, for "from of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who works for those who wait for

him.”

Today we begin the season of Advent, the season in which we anticipate Christ’s coming. It is not a season where we simply delay gratification, and wait for Christmas in such a way that when it comes the experience may be more intense. No, it is the season in which we need to come to grips with what is inside us, and need to come to grips with the sort of help we need – the help that will teach us how to accept help. And if we do, we may come to understand what God is really doing in becoming man, for it is nothing less than, as Isaiah also says, rending the heavens and coming down, making the mountains quake, of making his name known, and then working good for those who wait him.