**Waiting for the Potter**

Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

 The year was 1951. As we still do today, members of this church were getting the stage and the fellowship hall ready for the evening’s entertainment. Downstairs in one of the side rooms, people were putting on makeup for the theatrical performance about to take place. During the course of the evening someone decided it would be a good idea to take a picture of the actors and actresses. I came across the picture a number of years ago, so I knew it existed, but was never quite sure what to do with it and rather hoped it would stay stuck in the bottom of some file cabinet.

 As part of celebrating our 100 year anniversary Mike Bates and Susan Strebig were going through old historical records, including old photos and out came the picture. The photo captures two rows of people participating in the performance. In the back row are a group of men and women, presumably members of the church. The men have white shirts with a bandanna around their necks, much like a tie. The women are all wearing the same style dress with a simple pattern. In the front row is a group of men and women, dressed in what looks like clownish attire, with oversized bowties and mismatched clothing. With one exception, all the people in the front row have their faces painted black. It is a minstrel show. One can only imagine the affected voice that these members of Cherokee Heights Presbyterian Church took as they pretended to portray African Americans.

 The picture, of course, gets right to the heart of why we engage in a conversation about the whiteness of our stained glass Jesus. Through no fault of Jesus, the color of his skin in this window has been and continues to be used to justify benefiting one group of people while dehumanizing and disenfranchising others. It is a pattern of privileging and disenfranchising found in history books, music, art, government and corporate policies, like who gets a bank loan and it is found in our churches. You can understand why I was hoping this particular picture would stay hidden in the recesses of some file cabinet.

 The problem, of course, with hiding from our discomfort, hiding from the painful part of our lives, both individual and corporate, is that the hiding often sustains the pain and the brokenness. It keeps the brokenness festering, a wound that never heals, but rather is covered over so that we can pretend all is well.

This denial is among the underlying problems in Ferguson, Missouri, with the shooting of the young African-American teen, Michael Brown. Probably no one will ever know what exactly happened on that fateful day other than Michael and Officer Darren Wilson. But, it is not hard to imagine Officer Wilson stopping Michael with a tone that felt to Michael like one more time when he is being treated disrespectfully because he is a young black man. It is not hard to imagine how a young adolescent male might have said things the officer in turn found disrespectful and before you know it escalation has occurred and Michel is dead.

Behind that tragic incident lie minstrel shows and every other cultural expression that shaped officer Wilson and Michael as it has shaped us with negative messages about young African American males. Ferguson is no different than any other community in this country in wishing to keep that history, that story in the bottom drawer of their file cabinet.

 It is a very human instinct. Ever since Vietnam we have learned more and more about that rather awkward sounding diagnosis Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD). A person experiences a painful and traumatic event in his or her life and pushes it as far back into the bottom of her file cabinet as she possibly can get it. No one is allowed to look in that drawer. If someone says, “what’s in there?” she quickly responds by directing attention to one of the upper cabinets that feel much safer, much less painful or simply responding, “that one’s empty. Nothing in there to see”. All along, the wound, the hurt, the loss continues to fester. We all do it. There are hurts we carry, losses we have experienced, failures, or aspects of our lives over which we are less than proud and so they get put in that place where we do the best we can to forget all about it, hide it from site.

 In his book, “Dare We Speak of Hope” South African theologian, Allan Boseak states, “the temptation to let go, to seek an easier path, to hide in the safety of resignation and submission is always great, so great it is disorienting.” Boseak is specifically speaking about the trauma experienced by blacks in South Africa and blacks in the U.S. and the temptation to deny the impact of that trauma. But, what Boseak says applies equally to us all, “the easier path, the safer path” often appears to be the path of denial no matter what the hurt or loss.

 Both the prophet Isaiah and the Gospel of Mark are written to people who know full well the experience of human brokenness, loss and disappointment. Isaiah speaks to a people who for years dreamed of returning to their homeland from their exile in Babylon. Now they have returned only to find the city they dreamed about in ruins and the people who remained behind in Jerusalem largely unwelcoming and treating them as intruders. The great temptation of these former exiles is to stuff their brokenness and their pain in the bottom drawer of their cabinet.

 The same dynamic is at play for the people to whom Mark’s Gospel is written. Although the Gospel tells the story of Jesus’ life, it is written 30 to 40 years after Jesus has died and most importantly it is written to people who experience firsthand the traumatic events of Rome completely destroying the city of Jerusalem and slaughtering many of its inhabitants. Mark writes to a people who also face the tremendous temptation of keeping their pain and loss bottled up, hidden from site.

 Both the prophet Isaiah and the Gospel of Mark interrupt this hiddeness with the Advent insistence that truth be told. Both are convinced it is by flinging open the file cabinets, laying bare the truth in our world and lives, that God’s healing spirit can be at work. “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that your mountains would quake at your presence.” Mark uses apocalyptic language, that is language of deep metaphor, as a way of saying there is no place in the entire universe where one can hide the truth of our brokenness or alienation. “In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken”.

 Advent is a season that invites healing by naming our brokenness. It calls for the truth to be told in Ferguson and in St. Paul. It calls us to open our file cabinets and take out those things we prefer to keep hidden. One of the great ironies and losses of this time of year is that for most folks the commercialization of Christmas reinforces the denial that keeps us from being honest about our lives and world. The false joy pumped into the market place becomes yet another occasion for pretending and denying, leaving so many people with emptiness that can never ever be filled by a package under the tree.

 I am sure you understand my great temptation, my desire really to keep that minstrel show picture stored away in a cabinet. It is often hard to imagining how bringing out unpleasant truths can contribute in any way to healing the wounds in our lives and world. Best leave these issues, best leave that picture hidden in the bottom drawer.

 The prophet Isaiah was aware of those anxieties and fears when he says of God, “we are the clay, you are the potter, we are all the work of your hand.” I shared my anxiety about the minstrel picture with our antiracism team. They expressed gratitude to Mike and Susan, concluding this is part of our history. Then they went on to point out our history at Cherokee Park United does not end with that picture of brokenness.

If after worship, you venture into the older part of our church where our history display still remains what you will encounter is a congregation’s whose story includes years of participation in Cinco de Mayo, Building Blocks Tutorial, a weeklong reading camp at Torre de San Miguel that lasted for 17 years, a summer Peace Camp at this church, world music, community art, community forums addressing the treatment of our Indigenous brothers and sisters, support for the Mendota Mdewakanton Community, an MLK service with Grace Community Church, an annual service in remembrance of Oscar Romero, conversations about our stained glass Jesus, co-hosting an Annual Overcoming Racism Conference. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that no matter the issue, no matter how broken our lives and world might appear, God is at work. Rather than hide from our past, God can takes our losses, our brokenness and mold us into something new.

The pictures of loss, disappointment or brokenness we have stashed away in our file are never able to tell the whole story of who we are or who we might become. Patricia de Young, reflecting on Isaiah’s image of God as a potter says, “Hope is what comes with a broken heart willing to be mended.” Allan Boseak says, “hope teaches us a language…in which we can articulate our deepest longings for a life of human flourishing and fulfillment both as God’s gift and as our right as children of God, that can lift us out of the depths of despair, empower us to find the liberating and hope-giving God, who “makes a way out of no way”.

The question posed by Isaiah and Mark this morning is what is our hope this Advent Season? For what are we waiting? Do we hope to just get through another Christmas with as little disruption as possible? Do we hope to keep the painful parts of our lives hidden from site? Or is our hope in the one who can take all of our history, good and bad, molding us and shaping us so that we might more fully reflect the love and justice of God?

**Isaiah 64:1-9**

*The prophet Isaiah is more a tradition of prophetic truth telling* *than a single prophetic voice. The Isaiah in our lesson today speaks truth to a people who have returned from Exile in Babylon only to fall deeply into despair at the ruins of Jerusalem. Isaiah knows how God has been at work in our world and longs to see the power of God at work again. Although the people seem cut off, separated from God and all hope, the prophet insists we are the clay and God is the potter, who can mold us and shape us into the work of God’s hands.*

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, 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! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. 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.

**Mark 13:24-37**

*Mark is our earliest Gospel and is written to Christians who, following the death and resurrection of Christ, expected a dramatic turnaround in the world, with God’s justice being evident to all. Instead, no such dramatic change has occurred, but rather just the opposite. Rome has quashed the rebellion of the Jewish people with the brutal destruction of Jerusalem and the slaughter of many residents. Our passage today is directed to people who have lost hope in the future, and are questioning whether anything will ever change. Using the apocalyptic language of metaphor and poetry the Jesus of Mark’s Gospel encourages us to never lose hope, but to await with expectation the surprising ways God can transform our lives and world.*

 [Jesus said:] "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."