

“Longing” / Isaiah 64:1-9 / 30 November 2014

What did you hear in that text from Isaiah—in both texts, actually? If you could describe the overall emotion that guided the writers' pens, or quills, what word would you use? Are Isaiah and Mark fixated on vengeance, on retribution, on reprisal? Is it wrath, or judgment, or just more religious zealotry—of which the world has probably seen more than its share by our day and age? No, no, it's none of these. Echoing through the pages of the sacred text, echoing through this holy season of Advent, resounding down across the centuries. It's the same thread of emotion that runs through every great work of art, every enduring poem, the sacred writings of every faith, each powerful and evocative piece of music, each tear-jerking movie, every great painting, and all fine works of architecture and sculpture, indeed in every finger-painted drawing of a flower that is made with love by small hands and stuck to the fridge with a magnet: the same essential thread runs through all of them. It is longing, yearning, dreaming for what ought to be, if it is not. Longing is the universal emotion at the heart of all human endeavor, the bedrock on which all our greatest, and some of our dumbest undertakings have been founded. Simple longing. With the very first gasp of cold hospital air that we take into our lungs, the day we're born, we spend the rest of our lives in this world longing for things that seem forever just beyond our grasp. Today, as we begin this season of Advent, this season of dreaming and waiting, look into your heart. Just where you sit today, with your private store of memories, and hopes, and regrets: What are you longing for today? Well, it's Advent, a whole season dedicated to the longings of the human heart. And so, pull up a pew, and let's all of us long together. What are you longing for?

Is it a longing—or a yearning—what is it exactly, this growing desire that most of us feel to never again hear or read the name of Ferguson, Missouri? If it isn't a longing, then what is it, our deep, unspoken wish that the names of ISIS, and Boko Haram, and Al Qaeda would somehow just fade into the past, destitute and forgotten like the names of other erstwhile threats, like The Cold War, and The Eastern Bloc, and Cuba? Isn't it a longing, this recurring hope that when we open the paper or turn on the news we would nevermore hear about the possibilities of cyber-espionage, or terrorism, or race riots in our own streets again in the 21st century, as if this were the 1960s? Aren't we all hoping, in our heart of hearts, that the expression “climate change” will just fall out of current use, that November will go back to acting like November, and the whole concept of climate change will go the way of other forgotten scientific disciplines? Aren't we hoping, privately, that the science of climate change will someday look as silly to us as phrenology—the strange field of psychology that studied the shape of a person's skull in order to understand his or her psychological makeup, so that a big forehead meant a long memory, and so on? Or the flat earth theory, or the belief that all the universe centered around the sun? Didn't we all breathe a secret sigh of relief when we stopped hearing about the Ebola virus, and it became pretty obvious that though the threat continued in West Africa, it didn't seem likely to spread to our own country? Oh, the longings of the soul are many. We long for peace; we long for security; we long for a world where our children will have more than enough. We long for a day when *The Post-Gazette* will have no drug busts and no shootings to report, nothing but nice human interest stories—some couple restoring an old townhouse on the North Side; a lost cat who finds her way home; a helpful tip on how to cook a turkey; holiday recipes; concerts; more victories for the Steelers; children rescued from a house fire by the family dog. Oh, for the day when we'll open up our papers to read a love poem written for Highmark by UPMC.

Yes, the longings of the soul are many, but let's be honest. None of these things is going to just go away. Besides, I haven't even begun to name the ones that nag at you most deeply. No, we all care about ISIS, and Ebola, and climate change. But most of our deepest longings are something a little closer to home. “Everybody has a dream that they will never own.” We secretly long for the lives we never got to live. We wish for a degree of success or recognition that we never quite achieved, intimacy with one who seemed to promise it once but never delivered. We long for a sense of purpose, meaning, a little bit of passion to add some color to our daily routine. We yearn for something to throw our lives into, something bigger than ourselves to belong to. We wish to live with a sense of adventure,

or peace, or just the deep down, unshakeable conviction that the world will be okay for our kids. We long for so much, and most of it isn't all that large in scale: Just hear me; understand me; respect me. Love me. More than that, love the ones I love, and make sure they're okay. The great majority of our longings will never, never be named. They're not the things that make the news; they're the secrets that we carry to our graves. Some are appropriate and some are not, but we all live with longings. The deepest, most genuine, most persistent longing of the soul is to share union with one another...and with God our Source.

“O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” the ancient prophet cries. “We used to sense your presence with us. We used to feel that you were right here beside us, sharing in our life and in our death. But now you seem so far away. With you far off in heaven and us here on earth, all our troubles bear us away. We fade like a leaf. O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down! I don't know where you are, God, but you're not here!” This is the heart-cry of that nameless prophet of the exile, whose words are so intertwined with those of the Prophet Isaiah that we've come to call him or her “Third Isaiah.” This portion of the Book of Isaiah was probably written after the exiles had returned home from their long captivity in Babylon, but home just isn't what they thought it would be. For decades, they've dreamed of going back to a home that most of them had never even seen. For decades, they've longed for the day when they could reclaim their own land, their own place among the nations of the earth. They've written poems and songs about their far-away home and the sheer joy of returning. But here they are back in the place that they've been dreaming of. The cities lie in ruins. The plains that looked so broad, and green, and fertile in their dreams are actually kind of narrow, and dusty, and dry. In fact, the whole place is little more than a rocky desert. When the exiles come marching home at last, they look upon the thing that gave them hope, their own country, the place they'd been longing for all these years, and their hearts sink. It's not what they'd imagined. The Promised Land is a disappointment. “O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down! Our dreams haven't worked out! We got what we wanted, but it wasn't really what we wanted after all. O, that you would just fix it. Just fix it.” These words, spoken by the homecoming exiles 2,500 years ago, could just as well be spoken by all of us who find ourselves exiles-at-home, or outsiders, still today. “I have everything I want. I have everything I could ever ask for...but still, still I am not happy. Still, I bear within my soul a longing that nothing I possess can satisfy. O, that you would tear open the heavens.”

You've heard the expression, “Be careful what you wish for.” A married couple, both 60 years old, were celebrating their 35th anniversary. During their party, a fairy appeared to congratulate them and grant them each one a wish. The wife wanted to travel around the world. The fairy waved her wand and poof -- the wife had tickets in her hand for a world cruise. Next, the fairy asked the husband what he wanted. He said, “I wish I had a wife 30 years younger than me.” So the fairy picked up her wand and poof -- the husband was 90. Wishing is easy. All human beings are prone to it. But we don't always grasp the real ramifications of everything we want. The exiles longed to go home, and for decades, they prayed, and pined, and begged for home. Now that they're home, they don't even recognize the place. They're exiles still, exiles-at-home, and the very thing that kept them going when they were captives in a foreign land, the thing that gave them strength and hope—the dream of home—has been replaced by the much harder realities of home. They got exactly what they asked for, and it wasn't what they wanted. And now they feel like outsiders even in their own homes. There's no place at all where they fully belong. Have you ever felt that way? I think you have. I think many of us, perhaps even most of us, can relate to that.

Yes, we all live with longings because we are never entirely at home in the world that we call home. All of us live with longings because we sense within ourselves, from time to time, a deep dissatisfaction with the world that is. There are times when we feel an unearthly longing for a world that ought to be. We, all of us, belong to two worlds: the earthbound world of calendars and clocks where time is money, and money is power. There's the earthbound world of striving and saving,

economizing and getting ahead. It's a world that passes from generation to generation, each one growing up, and struggling, and suffering, and laboring, knowing joys and regrets, then disappearing like the one before it. It's a transient world where hopes often disappoint us, a world where we end up getting what we wished for but then taking it for granted or turning away disappointed. But on the verge of this world, always on the horizon, there is another, and it is our home, too. This other world is the place that Jesus called "The Kingdom of God," a place where the hungry are satisfied, where the sovereign is a shepherd, where the meek are blessed, and the last are first. This other world lingers on the edge of our every waking thought; it echoes through all our best dreams. We hear its strange and hopeful song in all the music that stirs our souls, the beauty that delights our eyes, and the words that bring courage to our heart and tears to the eyes. There is another world, and it is also ours. It is the world that ought to be. Its fullness eludes us, but we bear within ourselves the inklings of its calm and joyful eternity. And every here and now, every now and again, this other world calls to us in our lonely exile. Its song reaches us from afar, inspiring us to sacrifice and to suffer for all that is hopeful and right. Just every once in a while, we hear the songs of home, even in our exile, and we are moved toward acts of generosity and goodwill. Oh, it's universal, this longing for home. It's one of the best things we've got going for us. Only very few people are deaf to the call of our other home. As Jon Stewart once said, "The reason I don't worry about society is, nineteen people knocked down two buildings and killed thousands. Hundreds of people ran into those buildings to save them. I'll take those odds every day." We all of us long for a world that ought to be, and we catch visions of it here and there, now and again. It, too, is our home.

Ah, this holy dissatisfaction! This longing for another world! It guards us against complacency. It causes us to envision possibilities, moves us to action. This echo from a far off home is what enables some to look upon a blank canvas and envision lovely pastoral scenes. It causes others to create spellbinding music out of thin air, and others to see past the empty, forlorn room to the comfortable, livable space that it could become. When this other home of ours breaks through the dull routine of our days, it opens up new potential in places where before we saw nothing but old failures.

I used to love the novels of Paul Theroux, the guy who wrote *The Mosquito Coast*. Theroux spent his young adulthood in Africa, as I did, and most of his books are about white people coming to terrible ends in tropical places. There was a time in my life when I could identify with all of that; I half expected to find myself a character in one of his books. I don't read his stuff much anymore because I just can't take his misanthropy; he seems to genuinely hate humanity. But speaking about his life as an expatriate, Theroux once said, "Being away makes you a stranger in both places." I used to hold onto that sentence like Dumbo's feather, for I knew its truth in my own experience. I knew what it was to be a stranger in both places, and in a sense, I'm sure that you do, too. We are exiles, you and I. This world that we call home breaks our hearts. It leaves us longing for a world that ought to be. But for all the brokenness, for all the bad news, for all the failings and the fears of our times, we participate too in something bigger than ourselves. Each of us has a spark of eternity deep within our spirits, and there are times when that spark leaps into flame just long enough to lighten our darkness and show us the way forward.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" Can you hear the longing in that ancient cry? O, that you would fix what's broken in my heart and in your world! O, that you would put an end to disparity and injustice, that you would make sure everyone had enough. O, that you would get out of your lofty heaven and bring hope to all the earth!" On this first day in the Advent season, we've lit a single candle of hope. Just a single candle, but the tiny flame of hope is enough, and soon its light will grow. In just a few moments, you're going back to a world where nobody talks about their longings—though everybody has them. Soon, you'll find yourself adrift amid the duties and demands of the day—and it's easy to lose yourself in that place. But do not forget that you are an exile in this world that you call home, a child of two realities: one that tugs you in all directions and breaks your heart, but also another one that visits you with longings for all that ought to be and perhaps can be, if it

is not. Go from here and live more and more for the one that ought to be, the source of all your best longings and dreams. The longings themselves bear witness to eternity in our souls. Amen.