

First Sunday in Advent  
December 3, 2017

Text: Isaiah 64:1-9

Theme: “Stewing about the Stew”

It's the cooking time of the year. There are special foods associated with the season that vary from family to family. It could be oyster stew and cheese soup. Families have special cookies, cakes, and pies this time of year. Then there is the main course such as turkey, ham, roast, maybe duck or goose. Yes, we have our special foods and we have our comfort foods. Comfort foods may be ordinary but extraordinary in the feelings of safety, togetherness, and comfort that come with them.

What is your comfort food? It is macaroni and cheese? Is it fried bologna? Could it be beef stew? I just happen to have some of the ingredients for beef stew right here. I have carrots, potatoes, celery, onion, seasoning, and of course, beef. I need a boiling pot. It may take a little while. And I have a spoon to stir it all. Just give it time and it will be like being in that warm and safe area of mom's kitchen.

But what if there were a few stew issues? Suppose someone added rocks to our stew? What if someone stole our carrots when we weren't looking? What if someone put in about a half cup of salt? The stew would be ruined and we would be left stewing about our stew.

Today as we begin a new church year, the First Sunday of Advent has rolled around once more, I think there is some stew stewing a brew. Our stew, the mix of our life is not always to our liking. We usually know what we want in that stew, certainly a lot of comfort ingredients. Who would not want family, friends, good food, good job, and good times. For many God would have a place in that stew, seen as a fine, even important additive.

But then there are those mixed in undesirables. There is too much of a bad thing and it doesn't take much to be too much. There is friction, stress, insult, injury, and relational rifts. The bad comes in and the good is even pushed out, those ingredients we would want such as money, free time, peace and contentment.

And it's just not fair, is it? From what we can see or smell from our neighbor's pot, they are enjoying a more savory stew. It looks like they have a rich array of ingredients to choose from and maybe it may even be that abundance of their choices has come at our expense. And we ask, "why him," "why her," and, "why not me?" What did they do to deserve such a rich stew? Why, I know a thing or two about them that is not so attractive, what they have been up to. So I have seen or more likely, so I have heard. So I'm spreading the news, but not often to them. I manage to stir it in my conversations with others. I have the stew spoon in my stirring things up. I'm trying hard, but it seems to me, not the stew I desire. Don't I deserve better?

The stew in Judah in the days of Isaiah was not always so great. There were a few stew stealers, some from outside and some from inside. Judah had some hungry neighbors who looked upon the goods of other nations as eggs to be gathered or trees to be chopped down. So thought the Assyrians. They did a lot of gathering and chopping at Judah's expense. But Isaiah foresees and foretells the days when it would be worse. More good ingredients would be plundered away. In chapter 39 Babylonian envoys come to see King Hezekiah. He was very eager to show off his stuff. Isaiah told him that all those fine stew ingredients he had been displaying to them would be carried away as well as would be stew stirrers from his own family. Some of them would be palace slaves in Babylon (Isaiah 39:1-7).

The stew was also being ruined from the inside. The powerful and the well to do were adding to their own stews by taking from the weak and just scraping by. The fare of many was being reduced to stone soup and they were none too happy about it. And the stew might go from non nutritious to toxic with the addition of violence, famine, and idolatry.

There was a lot stewing about the stew. The cry came out for the return of the days of a whole lot of shaking, but not that of their knees. “Oh that You would rend the heavens wide and come down, that the mountains might quake at Your presence as when fire kindles brushwood and fire causes water to boil...that the nations might tremble at your presence! When You did awesome things...that mountains quaked at Your presence” (1-3). There are days when we are ready for the same kind of days, the days when God would act quickly, take care of those folks and those events that are stirring the stew against me. ‘Oh, yes, come rend those heavens wide.’

It's 'bout time! Advent is the about time time of year. We are ready for the Lord to come, ready for Him to act, or are we? Are we only ready for Him to straighten out others and to overlook any stray ingredients in our stew? The fact is we would not like to receive what we deserve. Really we should be stewing in our own juices. In our text there is a call followed by a confession admitting no deserving of God's acting can be claimed. We read, “From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides You, who acts for those who wait for Him....We have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment...our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, **and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.** (vs 4, 6, 7)

We stew about the sins of others. We focus on the speck in our brother's eye through the blurred vision of the plank in our own eye. The stewing should start with our own sin such as dissatisfaction, ungratefulness, envy, lack of patience, harshness, and all these from basic self-centeredness. We are not getting what we deserve. What we deserve is much less, but in God's mercy He has not poured it out. Yes, He should just let us melt in the hand, the boiling pot, of our own iniquities. In our text Isaiah says, "In our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?" (vs 5) What God should spoon over on us is death and destruction. We would not want Him to rend the heavens and come down and pour it out.

As Judah considers how they are stewing in the own juices of their sin, there is repentance, and a cry for deliverance. "Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not our iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people." (vs 9) And God does remember and will come down to deliver. This is the season we prepare for that coming. It will not be in the way of the quaking of the mountains and fire as was the case at Sinai. The heavens would not be ripped like a garment, instead He will be born of a virgin and wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Today in our Gospel lesson we see excited people spreading their garments before His way as He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. They are shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD" (Mark 11:10)! He comes so the time could begin when He would remember iniquity no longer. Yes, He has been angry, ever ready to pour out wrath against sinners, but instead the wrath is poured out against His Son. All of it is poured out, all for it for all of us, all the boiling, quaking, and shaking of divine righteous indignation on the Righteous One. This One who dies this accursed death has

no been raised up to life. He has conquered death before us and for us. He is now be lifted up to God's right hand and is even continually interceding for us!

Paul writes in our epistle lesson, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:3) Because of God's grace to us of our Lord Jesus Christ, we do have peace. Fixing the stew, straightening things out always begins with self-straightening of repentance. Hearts so turned then receive God's forgiving and straightening in Jesus.

God frees us from stewing about the stew. We realize the stirring spoon does not belong in our hands, but is in God's hands. We are not the cooks. This is the one to fit our hands (tablespoon). Through being buried, raised, and clothed in Christ, the miracle of the working of the Holy Spirit in God's Word, and baptism, we have a seat at God's table right now. We dine together, take it in through the spoon of faith. We take His forgiveness and strengthening in through His Word, and in His holy Supper.

One day the rending the heavens day does arrive. Our Lord returns in glory. There will be no missing it and there will be no one missing. All nations will be gathered before Him and will go either to the goat side or the sheep side (as we saw last week.) You will be at the table or not. It is either the wedding feast of the Lamb forever in the new heavens and the new earth, or to the outside, the darkness, the weeping and gnashing of teeth. The seats have been secured and reserved. Through faith in the Lamb, your name, brother or sister, is written on a place card. Yes, blessed are those with the tablespoon in hand.

But there is also another spoon to fit our hands right now, this one, a serving spoon. The stirring spoon remains in God's hands, but He uses us to get His good stew to those around us. Paul reminds his readers that they do not lack any spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 1:7). God gives what is needed for His people to get His work done. So He does with us.

He enables us to offer sacrificial service as we see not only to our own needs, but the needs of those around us. God is not an additive to our stew of life, He is our life, the stewing spoon is in His hand.

If we are stewing about the stew, remember that. Remember that our Lord took the stew of judgment for us that we may have the stew of blessing and service. We eat from God's providing at His table. We serve Him now as we long for that day of His return. For Jesus' sake. Amen