

## **Are You the Potter or the Clay?**

Isaiah 64:1-9

Six years ago in October Michelle and I received a call that jarred us out of bed in the middle of the night. Her niece Kimberly was calling to tell us that she got up that morning to find her three month old baby, Tayia, unresponsive in her bed.

They called 911 right away and the paramedics rushed over. But Tayia was gone. She had died of SIDS, or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. As some of you know, Kimberly has had a host of problems in her life, many of which were not her fault.

This was also not her fault. There are very few things you can do to prevent SIDS. Milwaukee has recently launched an ad campaign to try to get parents to stop sleeping in the same bed with their infants because doing so may lead to SIDS.

They ran ads with a picture of an infant sleeping next to a meat cleaver in bed. The caption said sleeping with your child is just as dangerous. They're doing so because Milwaukee's infant mortality rate is higher than 30 other developing countries' rate. And African American babies' rate is almost three times that of white infants.

Kimberly was not sleeping with Tayia. Tayia just died. I knew what it was like to be with parents who had just lost a child to SIDS. When I was a hospital chaplain in Illinois I was called to the emergency room to be with a young couple who had just found their baby dead in the crib.

It's their blank stare that I'll never forget. How could this have happened? How could God have let this happen? And then I walk in the room representing God and I tell them how sorry I am. I couldn't blame them for not having much to say to me.

Kimberly and her husband Jimmy had that same sense of shock. How could this have happened? They asked me to do the eulogy at a graveside service. I was happy to do it, but I had to struggle with the question of how to even talk about God's presence at a time like this one?

If I was going to talk about God's love and protection, people would be right to ask me where God was when Tayia stopped breathing. And if God was not involved in the situation, why not? And when could they expect that God would take an interest in them again?

And if God did, somehow take an interest in them again, what happens if God seems to be a no-show at some point in the future? Now these may seem the kinds of questions a real skeptic might ask. But they are questions that people

have been facing for as long as we've even had the capacity and awareness to think about God.

In fact, the Jewish people went through long periods where they thought God was no longer interested in their affairs. In fact, by the time of Jesus, they were convinced that God hadn't sent anyone to speak on God's behalf in over 400 years.

But even 400-500 years before Jesus when prophets were still speaking, sometimes what they said was not, "Oh, God loves you. God's gonna help us. Just hang in there." Sometimes the message was "Where are you God? Why are you still holding a grudge? Haven't we been punished enough? Aren't you tired of humiliating us by not doing anything for us?"

I'm sure I'm not the only person in the room who can say that I've had those same feelings at various times in my life. When you have serious tragedies or multiple situations that could end up destroying things that you hold dear, it's easy to turn to God and say, "What are you waiting for?"

The scripture we read for this morning comes from a time when the Jewish people were living in exile, having been forced to leave the Promised Land and live in Babylon for about 50 years.

This happened in 586 BC, when the Babylonians came through a final time and destroyed Jerusalem. They had been there before. They had destroyed a lot of property and murdered a lot of people.

They killed the king and put a Jewish governor in his place named Gedaliah. But Gedaliah still answered to the Babylonians. As you might expect, the people were devastated. The only thing they could think of was to rebel and overthrow the Babylonians.

But when they tried to do that the Babylonians came in and killed a lot more people. They even destroyed the temple. But the worst was that they took all of the most prominent people in society, along with sacred religious items, and marched everyone through the desert to live in Babylon.

While the people were exiled in Babylon they tried to make the best of it. They started businesses and some even made a lot of money. That's what the prophet Jeremiah told them to do.

Occasionally they got messages from the people back home, but the news was mostly bad. It's really hard to establish an ordered society and get everyone to cooperate when the leadership has just been forcibly removed.

For most of them, the only thing they could think about was getting back to the Promised Land. They had all kinds of stories about what life would be like once they did. They talked about it the way Christians later talked about the return of Jesus.

Eventually many Jews were able to return. The Persians came through and wiped out the Babylonians. The Persians let most of the Jews return as long as they paid the high taxes required by the Persians.

But when the Jews got back to the Promised Land, it didn't look so promising anymore. Isaiah 64 describes the temple like this, "Our holy and beautiful house where our ancestors praised you has been burned by fire, and all of our pleasant places have become ruins."

I remember the day a few years ago, the day after Christmas, when I heard that the church down the road had burnt to the ground. I couldn't believe it. As you know, someone forgot to extinguish the candles after the church service and the next thing you know, the place is gone.

I remember walking past the ruins of the church. All that was left was some burnt wood and the parts that were cement. Everything was covered with ice from the water the fire department sprayed on the fire. I couldn't imagine this happening to a church. Where was God when this was going on?

The prophet says Jerusalem is a desert. Nothing was left. Many people thought, "This is what God has left us? Is God still mad at us for whatever our ancestors did?" Despite their anger and their desperation, it seemed as though God wasn't going to do anything for them.

But the prophet says something to God which shows how people started to misunderstand their relationship to God. They started acting and thinking that they were the masters of their own destiny. That they were on their own. That if God wasn't going to help them, they'd better help themselves.

I think we're like them sometimes. We live in a world where people think less and less about the larger picture, how their actions affect others or whether God might be trying to do something in the world. We've lost this sense that there's something beyond ourselves and all the people and places we know about.

When you feel God has abandoned you, when you sustain a loss like the death of a child or a loved one, when you lose a job or feel like you chose the wrong career or cannot understand why your marriage didn't work, one reaction people have is to say, "Fine, I'll just try and make it on my own. If God isn't going to help me, I'll just mold my own existence. I'll make my own way in the world."

The Jews in exile did just that. They started business, they learned the local language, and they tried as much as possible to integrate themselves into this foreign land where people worshipped other gods and did things very differently. And they were successful. Many of them had profitable businesses. Many of them became respected members of their community, despite being exiles. And the language of the Babylonians became the language spoken by all the Jews.

So later on when the Babylonians were invaded by the Persians, and when some of the Jewish leaders got the all clear from the Persians to go back to Israel, there were a lot of people who said, "Forget it. I'm not moving. God has left our land to waste. Why would I leave my life here?"

If you believe that your land was invaded because God was punishing your ancestors for something, what happens if you go back and God decides to punish you again? Do you end up being invaded and slaughtered again? Why leave any of that to chance?

They were in charge of their lives in Babylon, even if they weren't in their own land. As the saying goes, the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know. The prophets and leaders had a hard time convincing people that they should go back to the Promised Land.

But the prophet deals with their reluctance by reminding them about their relationship with God. He reminds them, in a kind of roundabout way, that they are not God, they are not the masters of their own destiny, that they were a people chosen by God.

Their relationship to the world was not one where they shaped their world to their own liking. In fact, their lives were like clay in the hand of God. They were like children who had to live at the mercy of their father.

For instance, recall the time when your children or your friends' children were young and you taught them how to make things out of clay or play dough. You had complete control over what happened to the clay. You may not be able to shape it the way someone else could, but you and your child had complete control over that clay.

It's not as though you would make the clay into a shape and then the clay would say, "You know, I don't really care for this shape. Can you make me into something else that I'd like a little more? How about that shape over there?"

Isn't that the dream that the world keeps dangling over our heads? If you do this or you buy that or if you take this career path or take this medicine or subscribe to this service, you'll have control over your life like you've never had before.

And in some cases that's true. People with the money and access to technology have been able to take control over things in their lives that had previously been thought to be totally and only under God's control. Now we're in control over so many of those things.

But there comes a point in life where you run into something that you can't control, whether it's an illness, or an accident or a soured relationship or a financial crisis or a job crisis or even a war that you're forced into fighting.

And suddenly that illusion of independence and destiny and control and power that we've all come to savor comes crashing down. In comparison to God we really are the clay. Sometimes we are utterly powerless over our own world. And there is nothing worse than feeling such powerlessness.

There's nothing worse than losing a job and feeling like you're never going to find another one. There's nothing worse than trying to restore a soured relationship with your kids when they don't seem to want to have much to do with you.

There's nothing worse than watching a spouse struggle with an illness and going to all the appointments and spending all the money and all the efforts of taking care of that person, when you know they're just going to die anyway.

This is not a happy image, the potter and the clay. But the ray of hope in this passage is that the potter is God, a gracious, loving, fair God who loves us a lot more than an artist loves the pottery he or she makes.

One problem with this image is our tendency to look at the bad things that happen and say, "Why did God do this if God is so good? Because if you go that way, then God's responsible for children dying of AIDS and family writing us off and employers laying us off or someone stealing from us or – you fill in the blank.

And I don't think this is how God works. The image of God as a potter and us as clay is there to remind us that there is something beyond us, something forming us, making us into something better than we were.

And even when we feel powerless, when we feel we've gotten a raw deal in life, when we're wondering why we couldn't have turned out like someone else or ended up in someone else's situation instead of our own, it reminds us that whatever shape God is making out of us, it's good, and even when it's painful, we know it's always getting better.

When I was out in the Bay area last week I got to spend some time with a young man who attended the church that I pastored back in the mid 90's. I thought I had a hard time out there being a young pastor who inherited a church with a myriad of problems of which I knew nothing before I arrived.

But Rob really had me beat. When he was a young boy his father passed away. His mother was so irresponsible that she had to give him up for adoption.

Fortunately he had an uncle and an aunt who adopted him. They also adopted a cousin from another wing of the family.

Rob grew up with his cousin Tina, a Native American girl from an abusive home. Rob was the sweetest most respectful kid you'd ever want to meet. He and I and Michelle just bonded. But as he grew up, and believe me, we really were in the hood in Oakland, I imagine he spent a lot of time thinking about why God didn't let him grow up with his parents or why his mother gave him up or why he had such a hard time getting along with his aunt and uncle.

I'm sure he asked God why the church had to close when it was such a refuge for him. Rob kept attending other churches after we left and kept going to camp at the ABC camp up in the Sierras. But the churches he attended had some of the same problems we had, or, in some cases even worse.

The pastor of the other ABC church he attended, someone I knew, got really sick and the illness turned into a real point of contention between the pastor and the church. His pastor finally left the church, but then died a few months later. A few years after I left his cousin, the one he grew up with, got seriously involved in drugs and ended up dying of an overdose in her early 20's.

I was thinking about all he went through as we went to a bowling alley and shot some pool last weekend. He must have been thinking, "Who's in charge up there? Does this divine potter know what he's doing? Because it doesn't feel like it.

When I think about all he went through, and how he's come through it, and the fact that he still asked me to come out and do his wedding last summer, my problems in life actually seem pretty trivial.

I may not like the way the potter turns the wheel or shapes the direction of my life at times. I may want to look different or be different. And sometimes all I want to do is give up.

But those feelings arise from the desire to really be the God over my own life, rather than accepting that I cannot control everything, that there is something or someone beyond me, that the wheel is always turning and I'm not the one turning it, and there's nothing I can do about it.

God is the potter. We are not. We all admire people who appear to be the potter, shaping their own lives and the lives of the people around them. But that is an illusion. Ultimately they will come to the realization that they answer to someone else, as do we.

Fortunately our potter cared enough about us clay shapes to send someone who became like us. A potter made of clay, if you will. He got turned on the potter's wheel and had his life shaped too. But he got turned into the kind of shape we really should want to be. He became the mold we should strive for.

So as you think about what Advent means this year, as you put up your decorations and fill up your schedule and try to pull off all the things you want to do, remember that ultimately we are not in charge, no matter how much money or power or health we may think we can accumulate.

We can and we should attempt to be the best piece of clay we can be. We need to allow God to form us into whatever shape God thinks is best. And sometimes that process is painful. But we trust that the outcome, what the potter makes out of us, will look something like this Jesus guy who we all wish we could be like.