

“THE CLAY AND THE POTTER”

ISAIAH 64: 1-9

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University Church of Chicago

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Joyce Carol Oates is one of our most prolific novelists/essayists/ poets. She turns out several books a year, some of them compelling, some of them less-than-compelling. Anyone who publishes as much as Ms. Oates is bound to have some low moments. Her novel, *We Were the Mulvaney's*, plumbs the depths of faith better than almost any sermon you are likely to hear and with a grace to which many theologians can only aspire.

She tells the story of a Methodist family in Chautauqua County in upper New York state. The Mulvaney's are formed from the marriage of Corrine Hausmann and Michael John Mulvaney, and their story is, like your story and mine, filled with hope and tragedy, doubt and disaster, faith and failure.

When she was seven years old, Corrine was riding in a car with her mother across “crudely plowed roads” when they were caught in a blizzard. It was between Christmas and New Years, 1938. The snowstorm caused Ida Hausmann to lose control of her 1931 Dodge, which skidded off the road into a twelve-foot culvert. The car landed upside down on a frozen stream, and Ida screamed, “God help my baby and me. Don’t let us die!”

Ida and Corinne scrambled out of the car and started walking through the blizzard, hardly able to see, searching for shelter. They stumbled forward for what seemed like miles, until suddenly “there came...an eerie smoldering-red glow as if the dying sun had slipped its mooring and sunk into earth, buffeted by the terrible wind. It splintered into a myriad of fragments, glowing-red sparks, tiny as fireflies.

“And, in fact, they were fireflies! Mrs Hausmann saw with her dazed eyes what could not be, but was. Corrine, look! A sign from God! Mother and daughter stumbled in the direction of the fireflies which led them not as they would have gone...but in another direction entirely, and so saved their lives.”

Ida and Corrine had stumbled onto the dark hulk of a country schoolhouse, where they built a fire in the school’s wood-burning stove. “They would not be rescued for another twenty-four hours, by a sheriff’s rescue team accompanying a snowplow along the Ransomville Road, but from that point onward as Mrs. Hausmann would say they were in the bosom of the Lord.”

Corrine never forgot that experience, and as she grew up and became a Mulvaney , she would always say to her children, according to her youngest son, Judd, who narrates the novel: “Well, then! Don’t believe if you choose not to. I know what happened and I know what truth is and God’s purpose is not altered whether such as you believe or not.’ And we’d laugh, protesting, Oh Mom.”

No degree of disbelief could ever dissuade Corinne Mulvaney from the certainty that she and her mother had been miraculously saved by God's divine Providence on that snowy Christmas night in 1938. Judd describes her as being brought up "a commonsense Lutheran, not given to flights of religious fantasy. When such people are confronted by a truth they know to be true, they never change their minds, ever. Mom said you have to experience certain things to know certain things."

This season of Advent, this time between Thanksgiving and Christmas Day is a time when some of us know certain things to be true and others of us wonder if anything is finally, ultimately true. Some of us live with certainty, but more than a few of us are filled with doubt when we come to church during Advent. Some of us are moved to tears by the lighting of the Advent wreath signifying hope, peace, love and joy while others think that those words have lost their coinage in a secular age.

This passage from Isaiah raises substantial theological questions about the character of God and God's action in the world. These verses, part of a larger lament (63:7—64:12) introduce us to both a baffling God who hides from the people and a redeeming God who is their parent and maker.

This passage is both a lament and a plea. It begins by recounting "the gracious deeds of the Lord." Isaiah recalls the paradigmatic event of divine deliverance—God's rescue of the Israelites from Egypt in the Exodus. Yet, given God's visible and spectacular actions in that story, Isaiah finds it all the more troubling that God is not acting so decisively or powerfully in this moment after the Great Exile. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down"—Isaiah prays. Three times he asks for God's "presence," but God has hidden God's self from the people (64:5-7).

Consider for a moment how this passage relates to us. Certainly Israel's situation was different from ours, but there is a deep similarity between our existential conditions. We know that our reliance upon our massive, ruthless political power rather than the pursuit of justice has brought us into political disrepute among nations. We rely on military power, coercion, threats, torture and our own sense of self-righteousness.

Isaiah is not a proponent of easy grace. He shows us a God who is angry and silent, One who hides God's face from a people who reject God's ways.

The season of Advent is a time when the church is reminded to wait and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. We have festivals and light candles and sing special hymns and decorate the church and do all manner of things to prepare for Christmas. And in four short weeks we will celebrate the birth of the Christ child, the Messiah, God's promised One.

Is Advent simply another of the church's sentimental seasons, a time to feel warm and fuzzy and anticipatory? What will it mean if we come to the culmination of this season of waiting and hoping—only to discover that the Christ for whom we have waited is a demanding savior, one who brings judgment as well as grace?

Isaiah portrays a God in history who does awesome deeds that often surprise God's people. Yet God's people have often forgotten to call upon God, who in return has hidden from the people. Isaiah speaks

directly to God and reminds God that the people are like the clay that needs to be molded into the people God wants them to be. Isaiah pleads with God to forgive the people of their iniquities because they ultimately belong to God.

This is a season when a lot of people who have been alienated from religion or who long ago forsook the church begin to feel a longing to return. So, let's suppose one or more of those folks the mega-churches call "seekers" were to come to worship in University Church on one of these four Sundays of what the culture calls "the holidays." What would such a person find? Let's try to answer that question as honestly and forthrightly as we can.

A seeker wandering into this church would find a group of people who love each other, who consider themselves friendly, warm, open, liberal. But how would the seeker see us? I think coming to University Church is often like attending someone else's family reunion. We are friendly—to each other. We are warm—to each other. We are open—to each other. Liberal? Well, yes—until it come to dealing with conservatives. At that point we become conservative to the point of desperately conserving our liberal values and ideas.

But, according to Isaiah, we are not the only ones with selective memory. Isaiah accuses God of the same fault. He begins by reminding God of the history and the intimacy God once had with the people. I can just see Isaiah flipping through his notes as he writes this passage, and he probably surprises God by declaring that it may be God's fault that the people have fallen deeper and deeper into rebellion. It's the old chicken-and-egg question. Was it the people who caused God to get angry and hide from the people, or did the absence of God cause the people to do unrighteous things?

"You are the potter," God is reminded by Isaiah, "and we are the clay....We are your people." That longing for God's presence, God's immanence is palpable in this passage. Our hearts get broken, but that brokenness can lead us to new compassion. We have been reckless and selfish, but when we admit that, God can find new ways to open us to selflessness and compassion.

One of my psychology professors in undergraduate school used to define a neurotic as "a person who has a hard time distinguishing between a mountain and a molehill." Well, I think that means most of us frequently suffer from some kind of neurosis. As Freud noted, every one of us is, to some degree or other, neurotic. We look back at our lives and say, "Sometimes I wish I was what I was when I wished I was what I am now."

Advent, you see, calls us to more than a change of heart. It calls us to change our habits. A change of heart is not enough. We have to change the way we look at the world and deal with its problems.

My friend Tom Geoghegan wrote one of most penetrating books about race and class in America. It is entitled *Whose Side Are You On?* Listen to how he describes his first morning working at a soup kitchen run by nuns on Chicago's West Side:

"The smell in the room was overpowering. The T-shirts seemed pasted on the men with fourteen days of sweat. I would stink of cabbage and ammonia and sweat for days after I left. Waiting for the nuns to

open the door, I had almost gagged, and I wondered how the men could even bear to eat.” Far from extolling his own virtue, Geoghegan confesses: “I had expected at the end of it all to love the poor, to be filled with a warm glow. But I didn’t feel any love for the men here...there was something hollow about the whole experience. I complained to my friend the priest.

“He said, ‘You’re not down there for self-actualization.’” Tom protests: “I didn’t feel any love for them.” The priest replies, “So what...the church says nothing about that...Look, those nuns are not liberals. They are conservative, semi-cloistered...They don’t care about ‘love’ in our modern, interpersonal way. We, the liberals, want love: we go to soup kitchens to be loved. The nuns go there to feed people. That’s it. Give them something to eat.”

We cannot get to the hope of Advent until we deal with our anger toward God as well as God’s anger toward us. Hope, may I remind you, is different from wishing. I can wish all day long that I were a millionaire or that I were thin and handsome or that my congregation was filled with optimistic, loving people. But the truth is: wishes are often manufactured out of the sinful side of our imagination.

Hope, however, does not materialize out of thin air. Hope is the result of discipline, of learning and living what’s important. Hope is the result of obedience and trust. When you live through the wilderness with faith in God’s will, you can see the fireflies shining through the snow of a Chicago winter.

The smallest street in Paris is called *La rue du chat qui peche* (The street of the cat that fishes). Leading off the Seine near Notre Dame, it extends no farther than a quarter of a block, and it is so narrow that two bicycles could hardly pass one another. Each year thousands of tourists, strolling down the quay, come to the head of the street, peer down, read the sign, and exclaim, “How picturesque, how quaint.” And they whip out their new digital cameras to take all kinds of pictures to show the peasants back home who could not afford to come to Europe and deal with the distance between the dollar and the euro.

Were those tourists to venture down the street, however, and peer into the dark, dank rooms that pass for habitation, they might conclude that “the street of the cat that fishes” is more suitable for cats than for human beings. It’s picturesque all right. It’s also horrible.

The same holds for Advent. If we get all gooey and sentimental as we see the lights and decorations and await the coming of the Child, we will forget the unsentimental truth about the season: He came to be the Bread of Life for human beings and was born in a stinking stable and laid in the feedbox of animals.

God cannot save us—not until we feel the need to be saved.

Peggy Pond Church has summed it up in a poem called “Ultimatum”:

Now the frontiers are all closed.
There is no other country we can run away to.
There is no ocean we can cross over.
As last we must turn and live with one another.

We cannot escape this day any longer.
We cannot continue to choose between good and evil
(The good for ourselves, the evil for our neighbors);
We must all bear the equal burden.

At last we who have been running away must turn and face it.
There is no room for hate left in the world we must live in.
Now we must learn to love. We can no longer escape it.
We can no longer escape from one another.

Love is no longer a theme for eloquence, or a way of life
For a few to choose whose hearts can decide it.
It is the sternest necessity; the unequivocal Ultimatum.
There is no other way out; there is no country we can flee to.
There is no one on earth who must not face this task now.