

## **Sermon: Restore Us, O God**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Dec 3, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Hope is a powerful thing, yet sometimes it can be misplaced.

Recently, I have been intrigued by how Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, the CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company ended up in charge of COP28, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, taking place this year in Dubai, UAE. For those who have been following the news on climate change, COP stands for Conference of the Parties, and this is the 28th meeting of member countries who have signed on to the goals of limiting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius, helping vulnerable communities adapt to the effects of climate change, and achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. These are ambitious goals whereby member countries voluntarily agree to set certain emission targets to greenhouse gases, with the hope that global climate change will not go completely out of hand.

The early indications are not promising: 2023 is turning out to be the hottest year on record; climate scientists have mostly abandoned the the limit of 1.5 degrees Celsius and are now openly projecting 2 or 2.5 degrees warmer by 2050, a nightmare scenario of global climate catastrophe. The effort to set up an emergency relief fund to help vulnerable nations devastated by climate change continues—funds are set up, pledges from wealthy countries have poured in, but no actual money yet.

Meanwhile, emission targets are routinely being missed by member nations, as they are voluntarily and all, including right here in Canada. I read in the news that Canadian governments of both stripes, the Liberal and the Conservatives, have consistently missed emission targets they have previously agreed to. Our records on climate actions are simply deplorable, but let's be frank, our impact on the global scale is really negligible.

All that is to say, there is a lot of hope riding on COP28, and eyes of the global communities are zeroed in on Sultan Al Jaber, President of this meeting, on what he will say, what he will do. How then, one might ask, did an oil man, a very powerful oil man, get to become the president of a

climate conference? Isn't that like letting a fox guard the hen house, or letting a wolf into the sheep pen? Oh, I can go on, but that would be simply unkind of Al Jaber.

By all account, the Sultan is a good guy—he says the right thing, knows the right people, and has been vying and working for years to become the president of the climate conference. The point he consistently raised, and I do think is a good point, is that the oil and gas industry, the single biggest global emitter of greenhouse gases, needs to be at the table in order to really solve this global climate crisis.

But critics, and there are some fairly outspoken ones, are not so convinced. Can this powerful oil man, who now has a foot in both camps—the oil & gas industry and the environmental groups—really deliver on what he promised? Can the humanity's reliance on fossil fuel be rapidly phased out? Can it be transitioned quickly into clean, non-polluting sources of energy? Or is such a hope, misplaced or even delusional?

Just a couple days ago, reports out of Dubai indicate that Al Jaber has skillfully sneaked into the agenda of COP28, a discussion on oil and gas side deals, mainly on liquified natural gas I believe. And oh, by the way, Canada is apparently on-board with such a discussion. Just can't pass on the opportunity to make more money, even when the planet is heating out of control. Hope in this UN climate conference, or on Sultan Al Jaber, is by all account, quite misplaced.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this first Sunday of Advent, hope is in our mind and in our thought. The passage in Isaiah 64 pleads for God to 'come down', as in verse 1,

*“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”*

The prophet envisions the heavens like a canopy, its fabric rips apart as the Lord God descends upon the earth. The purpose of such 'coming down', as we are told in the subsequent verses, is so the name of the Lord be made known, and at the presence of God, nations might tremble.

Isaiah, or to be more specific, the Third Isaiah as biblical scholars phrase it, prophesied during the time of post-exile, about 6th century BC. It was a confusing time for the people of God, with great hopes and great disappointments. Although the city of Jerusalem and the temple within had been rebuilt, its craftsmanship and materials used were poor, far from its former glory to the eyes of those who still remembered. The people lived in

constant fear amidst fast changing political landscape. Life for the returnees was hard.

They still clung to the memory of the Lord God who had heard their cries, as in verse 4,

*“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.”*

Yet the scars of God’s punishment for their previous disobedience and unfaithfulness were not yet fully healed, as in verse 5-6,

*“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.”*

Yes the people had repented, but the shock of God’s anger had not quite faded. Nevertheless, the prophet understood that it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals (Psalm 118:8). So he, on behalf of the people, turned towards God and pleaded in verse 8,

*“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.”*

It is an absolute acknowledgement that apart from God, we are all just ash; cut off from God, we are all just dust. Dust and ashes we are, but in the hand of our maker, our Father, we are people, chosen, covenanted, and cherished. Oh indeed, even with an angry God, it is still better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals. Hope in this case, rest entirely on God. Those who wait for the Lord, shall never be disappointed.

However, waiting for the Lord is not an excuse to skirt our collective responsibility. The Lectionary reading pairs the passage of Isaiah 64 with Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth.

Right from the beginning, in the opening chapter, Paul calls them saints, and give thanks to God for what God has already done for them in Christ Jesus. For those who have studied the First and Second Corinthians, you would know that congregation was in a bit of a mess. Located in a vibrant port city, the congregation was consisted of people with wide variety of background and gifts, in speech and knowledge of every kind. But they were not united, and their personal conducts were, by all account, anything but saintly.

Paul would eventually get to those messiness in his letters, but he first gives thanks to God, and reminded them that they were indeed enriched and strengthened by the good news of Jesus Christ, and they were not lacking in any gift as they wait for the revealing of the Lord. Hope in this case, carries a certain responsibility to get our acts together, so as a community of faith that professes belief and trust in the Triune God, can be an example to others, to the nations of the world.

So on this first Sunday of Advent, we are awaken from our complacency by these Scriptural passages. We may scoff at the rampant consumerism of our society (think Black Friday, and Cyber Monday, and on and on it goes with a month long Christmas shopping season), but realize we too play a part in it. We may lament for a broken and rapidly heating world, but realize we too have a collective responsibility, to safe guard it for the next generation, and for our existential survival. We may plead and hope for God to come down to solve all our problems, all our ills, but realize that God has already come in the form of a child some two thousands years ago.

For thirty and three short years, he walked amongst the people, healed the sick, gathered the lost, and preached the Good News that the Kingdom of God is near. Hope indeed is a powerful thing, but only if we rightly place our hope in God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**