

December 3, 2017

Your oppression is not your fault
Isaiah 64:1-9

1/4

PODCAST START:

[intro music]

Brian: Welcome to the Queer Theology podcast!

Fr. Shay: Where each episode, we take a queer look at the week's lectionary readings. We're the cofounders of QueerTheology.com and the hosts for this podcast. I'm Father Shay Kearns —

B: And I'm Brian G. Murphy.

FS: Welcome back! This week we're taking a look at the lectionary text for December 3rd, and it is the beginning of Advent. So we're into a new church season, which is really exciting. We're going to take a look at Isaiah 64:1-9. I'm going to go ahead and read it for us – this is from the Common English Bible.

If only you would tear open the heavens and come
down!

Mountains would quake before you
like fire igniting brushwood or making water boil.

If you would make your name known to your enemies,
the nations would tremble in your presence.

When you accomplished wonders beyond all our
expectations;
when you came down, mountains quaked before you.

From ancient times,
no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any god but you
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him!

You look after those who gladly do right;
they will praise you for your ways.

But you were angry when we sinned;
you hid yourself when we did wrong.

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We have all become like the unclean;
all our righteous deeds are like a menstrual rag.

All of us wither like a leaf;
our sins, like the wind, carry us away.

No one calls on your name;
no one bothers to hold on to you,
for you have hidden yourself from us,
and have handed us over to our sin.

But now, Lord, you are our father.
We are the clay, and you are our potter.
All of us are the work of your hand.

Don't rage so fiercely, Lord;
don't hold our sins against us forever,
but gaze now on your people, all of us. ... [CEB]

Whoa.

B: Ooooh. There. Mm.

FS: What do you do with this?

B: So I – first of all, I just think it's beautiful. The writing is just so beautifully written. And I relate to this on a visceral level. It makes me think of parallels between the ancient Hebrew people who were a small and vulnerable community, and a modern queer community which is also small and vulnerable, and that there's this dichotomy of this great and powerful god who accomplishes wonders beyond all our expectations... Sometimes, the queer community just feels so bold and brilliant and unstoppable, and we have this mighty force of queer magic on our side. And you know, there's other times where, here in Isaiah, "You were angry when we sinned and hid yourself when we did wrong," and this sense of feeling very distant from God, and that God has abandoned us. I know, sometimes, as a queer person, the queer community can feel really lonely and scary and fragile. Holding these two ideas in tension together, this triumphant God-blessed community and this scared and fragile and forsaken community. I see that, just in these nine verses, I see that in the ancient Hebrew people here, and I can see parallels in the queer community just over the past

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3/4

fifty to a hundred years. It just feels so resonant with me, that we are a part of this story of faith that has been told for millennia and now we're telling our chapter, when we tell of the liberation of coming out of the closet, and the movement for recognition and equality, to the devastation of AIDS, to the excitement of marriage equality, to the violence and horror of hate crimes – it's just all in there. We're a part of this faithful story too. What about you, Shay?

FS: It's so interesting, because this was a passage that was used a lot growing up in my church, in two kind of different ways. One was this, 'we've all become the unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a menstrual rag' – that verse was used a *lot* to be like, look at how wretched and awful and dirty and nasty you all are, as a community, and you can't do anything right. I remember feeling like, man. I'm kind of bummed out by that all the time. And then there's this other piece of like, 'we are the clay and you are the potter, and all of us are the work of your hand' – and this idea that God could mold and shape us into whatever God wanted us to be. We didn't really have a choice in the matter. We were just clay—

B: Ooh.

FS: —and clay doesn't get to tell the maker what it wants to be. Right? So it's interesting to revisit this passage. A, to read the whole thing in context, right, because that didn't happen very often. [Brian laughs] But then also to be someone who, I don't believe in a God anymore who thinks I'm trash, nor do I believe in a God who just wants to make me a puppet for whatever this God desires. I believe that I have agency and that God has created me with my own desires and talents and skills and gifts. I'm supposed to use those, not just be a puppet for whatever God wants me to do. So in some ways I kind of struggle with this passage, because I don't believe in this anymore. And yet, at the same time, I see in this passage the fact that we have, like you said, this marginalized community, this small community, who's trying to make sense of the shitty things that are happening to them. I think it's often easy for communities that are marginalized by the world, who are oppressed, to turn that oppression inward, and to start to ask, what did we do wrong that is causing God to hate us, or to punish us, or what did we do wrong that's causing society to discriminate against us, or what did we do wrong that's causing us to be murdered or disrespected... I think that that right there is a tool of oppression, this internalizing of bad behavior from other people with power. It's a way that they keep queer and trans people quiet. It's a way that oppression works to cause us to fight amongst ourselves. It's a way that oppression works to force us into respectability, as if, like, if we just behaved better, we would get treated better. We know that that's not true.

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B: Ugh, right.

FS: There's a part of me that wants to say to this passage, it's not about anything you've done that shitty things are happening! It's because the world is oppressing you! And God is on your side in the midst of that oppression. The way forward isn't to buy into respectability or to rake yourself over the coals or to think that you're a terrible person. The way forward is to stand in your own dignity, to stand up for yourself, to band together with the rest of your community, to fight back. God is on your side and is fighting with you and is standing with you as you do that work.

[outro music plays]

B: The Queer Theology podcast is just one of many things that we do at QueerTheology.com, which provides resources, community and inspiration for LGBTQ Christians and straight cisgender supporters.

FS: To dive into more of the action, visit us at QueerTheology.com. You can also connect with us online on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram.

B: We'll see you next week.

PODCAST END

Transcript by Taylor Walker

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