

DESPERATION HOPE

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Rev. Tom Ott

First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
145 Capital Ave., NE
Battle Creek, MI 49017
269-965-1225
www.fccb.org

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Isaiah 64: 1 Desperation Hope

How desperate are you feeling these days? Do things feel out of control in your life? Can you feel the edge of panic lurking in the background? Do you find yourself tossing and turning in your bed at night as you worry about the decisions you have to make and the situations you have to resolve in the near future?

There is an atmosphere of desperation floating in the air of our culture today. We breathe it in every time we inhale. This year retailers who are desperate to boost sales in this stagnant economy decided to open their stores at midnight on Thanksgiving. On Friday evening's news I watched sad and pathetic pictures of people in tents and lawn chairs who chose to sit on the sidewalk in front of the Best Buy down on Beckley Road all Thanksgiving Day so that they could be first in line when the doors opened at midnight. Deep discounts on 42" plasma flat screen televisions were more attractive than spending a day with family and loved ones enjoying each other's company and celebrating a feast of gratitude. One shopper at a Wal-Mart in Los Angelis was so desperate to get her hands on an X-box video game console that she pepper sprayed other bargain hunters who were standing around her waiting for the store clerks to unwrap the shipment. Even by Black Friday's standards, that seems pretty desperate to me.

On Monday of last week, Detroit Public Schools' second state appointed emergency financial manager Roy Roberts announced that the district had reduced its deficit from roughly \$327 million to \$89 million during this fiscal year. Detroit public school district is one of 23 public school districts in Michigan with deficits of more than 1 million dollars. These are desperate times for many children and

teachers in public education.

Monday of last week was also the day when the congressional super committee that was appointed to work out an agreement for reducing the federal deficit by 1.2 trillion dollars over the next 10 years, announced that it had failed in its mission. Appointing a super committee with unprecedented powers was an act of desperation by a partisan congress hopelessly caught in gridlock. When the super committee announced that they could not agree on an acceptable solution, the Dow responded with a 248 point drop in the stock values. Our nation's debt is \$15 trillion and our elected leaders have proven that they are incapable of overcoming ideological differences in order to work out a fair and balanced plan to reduce the deficit.

Last Wednesday Detroit mayor David Bing announced that the city is on the verge of having its finances taken over by a state appointed emergency financial manager. He announced that he is going to war with the city's labor unions and with the members of the City Council to reduce the city's deficit by \$102 million over the next 6 months in order to avert a cash flow crisis. Bing's plan calls for cutting city worker's salaries by 10%, increasing their share of health care costs to 30%, restructuring pensions, changing work rules, and reducing overtime. All that is in addition to eliminating 1,000 city jobs. But the City Council has not given their support to the mayor's plan and cooperation between the mayor and the council seems to be disintegrating in the face of this looming financial crisis. Declaring war against fellow public servants seems like an act of desperation.

In Egypt this week 100,000 protesters re-occupied Tahrir Square, this time protesting the military rule that usurped the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt and calling for an immediate transfer of power to civilian authorities. In Syria, President Assad remains defiant even as members of the Arab League threaten additional sanctions because of

Syria's brutal crackdown on protesters calling for free and democratic elections. A sale of 6 month bonds in Italy this week was unable to secure an interest rate below 6.5%, double the rate of bonds sold just three months earlier to finance the country's short term debt. Fear over the possibility that Italy might default on its huge national debt sent European countries into a panic.

There is an atmosphere of desperation floating in the air of our culture today. It is in our personal finances, it is in our housing market, it is our job market, it is in our public institutions, it is in our health care system, it is our school systems, it is in our retirement systems, it is in our banking system. And it is not just here. There is an atmosphere of desperation floating in the air all around the world.

But here in Christ's church as we breathe in that air of desperation, our faith helps us to respond not with panic, but with hope. Today we begin the season of Advent, this wonderful four week season that prepares us to enter the full joy of Christmas, by lighting the candle of hope. And the text that we read this morning from the ancient writings of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah has a lot to teach us about responding with hope in desperate times.

Isaiah wrote the words we read this morning to desperate people living in the 6th century BC. They were Jews of the Diaspora who had returned home to rebuild the holy city of Jerusalem after living in exile in Babylon for forty years. Their ancestors had lived in Jerusalem since the days of King David. They had built the great temple under King Solomon's reign and fortified the city with a great wall of hewn stones. Year after year Jews from all of Judea came to the temple in Jerusalem in sacred pilgrimage. But in the year 587, King Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army laid siege to the city and breached its walls and left no two stones standing on top of each other before carrying the leaders of the city off to Babylon to live out the rest of their lives in captivity.

The children of those exiles had grown up hearing stories of their ancestral home. They listened to their parents longing to return and dreaming of the days when they would all be together again in Jerusalem. But that day took forty years to come. Their parents died in Babylon without ever seeing their homeland again. When the next generation was finally released from captivity and set free to return to the land of their ancestors, they looked forward to fulfilling the dreams of their parents. They set out from Babylon full of excitement and anticipation.

But when they arrived, they soon discovered that the scale of destruction was overwhelming. There was so much that needed to be done that they hardly knew where to start. And in their forty year absence, Persians had been resettled on their ancestral lands and they were not about to give up their homes without a fight. They resisted every effort the Jews made to reclaim their homes and sabotaged every work project they initiated. The first returning exiles were few in number. Many had stayed behind in Babylon where they had built homes, started businesses, raised families, and put down roots. They were glad to hear that some of the exiles were returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the city of David, and perhaps they too would return one day on pilgrimage, but they were not at all interested in participating in the rebuilding effort. Some of the exiles got discouraged and returned to Babylon. Others stayed, but gave up on their dream of restoring Jerusalem to its ancient splendor. Instead they built shelters amid the ruins and blended in with their new neighbors.

Isaiah breathed in the atmosphere of desperation that floated in air as the returning exiles got discouraged and teetered on the edge of giving up on their dreams, and he offered up a prayer of lament to God: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil--to

make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!” Isaiah began by praying for a miraculous intervention by God. Just get down here and fix this mess. Make things right again so that we can get on with living the kind of lives we expected to live.

We’ve all prayed our own desperation prayers asking for God’s miraculous intervention. We’ve prayed for our injuries to heal, for stocks to recover, for housing prices to rebound, for jobs to open up. We’ve prayed for elected leaders to collaborate on bipartisan solutions that serve the common good. We’ve prayed for the messiah to come and restore the viability of our public institutions. Whenever we breathe in the air of desperation, we too pray for God’s miraculous intervention: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...”

But Isaiah’s prayer didn’t stop there. While he was praying, the prophet remembered how God had delivered their people through all of the challenging times they had faced in the past in ways that were surprising and unexpected. He remembered how God had delivered their ancestors from their bondage in Egypt, through their harsh years of wilderness wanderings, through the death of Moses, through their battles with Philistines they fought when they crossed over the Jordan to take possession of the Promised Land, through the crises of the Judges, through the reign of their kings, through the invasion of the Assyrians, through the fall of Israel, through their exile in Babylon...when Isaiah remembered God’s faithfulness in the past, the panic he felt from the desperation that he was breathing in every day was transformed into hope. You could hear it happen in our text for this morning when he spoke the word “yet:”

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

That is the part of the prayer that turns the panic of desperation into hope. So today we light a candle of hope remembering God's saving acts. We light a candle of hope remembering the surprising and unexpected ways that God has delivered us in the past. We light a candle of hope remembering that even when things aren't working out the way we expected, the God whose hands continue to shape our lives will deliver us through every challenge we face so that even as we breathe in the atmosphere of desperation that pervades our culture throughout the world, we live with a faith that transforms panic into hopeful anticipation. Amen.

