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Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Isaiah 63:16b-17;64:1-8

You, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance.

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry.

How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.

These are your words, Heavenly Father; sanctify us by your truth; your word is truth!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Clay vessels are not as important in our day as they were in the days of Isaiah. Back then they didn't have stainless steel, glass, plastic and Tupperware like we do today, so pottery was very essential in their day-to-day lives, and very valuable. It was a common thing to see a potter at work.

If you've ever watched a potter, then you know how fascinating it is to see what he can create out of a simple lump of clay. As the wheel spins, with his hands he carefully shapes and molds that clay, turning it into whatever he wishes. When you watch, you think to yourself, "I would do this with that pot. I would form it taller. I would form it wider." But that's up to the potter. It's all in his mind and hands. My son Luke used to work with pottery. For me it was bit frustrating watching him, because I don't have enough patience for pottery. He'd get a bowl formed, and I'd think, "That's good enough. Take it off the wheel and be done with it." But no! He would keep forming it more, making the clay thinner, then trimming it. If there was a bubble in it, or anything wrong with it, he would crumple that clay up in a ball, throws it back down on

the wheel and start over again. Once finished, that jar or bowl is unique, not another one like it in the world, because it was hand-made by the potter. He planned it. He formed it. It is the work of his hand.

In our verses, we hear the Lord's faithful people say to him, "We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." This morning let us watch the mighty hand of God at work, forming his chosen people Israel. Through them he would be sending the Savior whose birth we prepare to celebrate at Christmas, shaping the salvation of mankind. May we also see the hand of the Potter in each of our lives, and in the life of our congregation, working with these lumps of clay.

Let's take a look at a clay pot that the Lord made--the Old Testament children of Israel. Remember how the Lord called Abraham and promised him that he would become the father of a great nation, and that the Savior would be born from his descendants. Remember how the Lord provided for his people during the great famine by sending Joseph ahead of them into Egypt to store up food for those seven bad years, and then sending Jacob and the rest of his family to Egypt where the Israelites increased in number and became a great nation. The hand of the potter was at work, sending plagues upon Egypt, to convince hard-hearted Pharaoh to let his people go. Look at the hand of the potter, guiding his people through the wilderness, parting the waters of the Red Sea, sending down manna for them to eat, giving the people his law at Mt. Sinai, defeating their enemies before them, causing the walls of Jericho to tumble, and giving them the Promised Land of Canaan. Look at the hand of the potter blessing his nation of Israel during the reigns of King David and his son Solomon. Without the Lord, the Israelites would have been nothing. He molded and shaped them and made them everything they were. He made them his special chosen people. They were the work of his hand.

But things were a bit different during the days of Isaiah. It seemed like the Lord had crumpled up the pot he had been forming. Isaiah lived about 700 years before Christ, during the stormy period of the decline of Israel. The kingdom had long been divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Isaiah saw the day in 721 B.C. when the Assyrian armies conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and carried the people away to captivity. The southern kingdom of Judah remained; however, at the word of the Lord, Isaiah warned the people that they too would be conquered by Babylon, and carried off into exile there. Why did the potter throw away his vessel? Why did God forsake the people he had so carefully formed?

Our verses give us the answer: "[LORD,] you come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry." The people were a flawed and deformed piece of pottery. Not that God had made them that way, rather they had rejected the Lord, and forsaken his ways. Instead they worshipped false gods, and lived wicked, selfish and hateful lives. Yes, the Lord is a loving and forgiving God. But when his love and forgiveness are despised and trampled under foot, in his righteousness, he becomes angry. When people reject the Lord, he lets them go their own way and get into trouble as they always will.

But there were also those whom the Lord moved to repent of their sins and to trust in the Lord. It is the prayer of those faithful few that we have before us this morning, a prayer to the Lord to deliver his people and bring them back to himself. And it should not be limited to them. It is our prayer to the Lord for his deliverance as well. "You, O

LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance....You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins."

How totally sinful God's people were back then. And how totally sinful we also are today. If we're honest with ourselves, we must admit that we have continued to sin against the Lord's ways. Those pet sins are hard to give up, whether it's anger, disobedience, gossip, lust, love of money, or a simple lack of trust in the Lord. These sins rightly anger the Lord. We must admit that by ourselves we too have drifted ever deeper into sin, so that all of us have become like one who is unclean.

In the Old Testament, those who were inflicted with the terrible contagious disease of leprosy were to stay away from all other people. If someone came toward them, they were to warn the person by shouting "Unclean!" They were unclean; their flesh rotting off their bones, and the stench that went along with that. People avoided them like the plague. In our sinfulness, that's the way we have become to God, detestable to him. We are so corrupt that we can't do anything right. Even the good things we do are filthy. "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags," The translators have been polite. The Hebrew words say that our righteous acts are like menstrual garments. Even our best deeds are tainted by sin and are detestable to God because they proceed from a sinful heart. Therefore "we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." Our sins can only condemn us before God and destroy us. In their sin the nation of Judah could only come to its end and be destroyed in Babylon.

"How then can we be saved?" is a good question. And here is the answer: "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." The Lord can make sinners into his people. He can reshape, reform the pot. He could return and rescue his people and bring them back to himself. That's exactly what this prayer asks the Lord to do, to rescue his people from Babylon and draw them unto himself as he had once rescued his people from Egypt. This prayer asks that the Lord would finally carry out that greatest deed and send the Savior of the world through his people Israel. The faithful pray to the Lord: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him."

The Lord answered the prayer of his people in Babylon and did later bring a remnant of Israel, his faithful few, back to the land of Canaan. Through them we know how God did rend the heavens and send his own dear Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary to win our eternal salvation. It is that Savior who is at the heart and center of this prayer. "We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work

of your hand." How can the Lord shape and form filthy sinners into his holy people?

Let's again watch the potter at work. See him planning our salvation in Christ before the creation of the world. See his many promises of the Savior to his Old Testament people. See his hand forming and shaping his nation of Israel for the purpose of sending the Savior of the world through them. See his mighty hand guiding all events of history to carry out his gracious plan of salvation. See God the Father, sending his own Son into our world of sin, to become clay like us, to live a perfect life in our place, and to suffer on the cross the punishment we deserved for our uncleanness and filthy lives. See the Father raise Jesus from the dead, giving us full assurance that our salvation is complete.

Behold the vessel of salvation the mighty hand of God has wrought for you! In Christ can we see the hand of the Potter at work in our lives? God has carried out your forgiveness on that cross. Through baptism and his holy word he has formed you as his own dear child. It is the Potter who has guided all events in our lives, bringing each of us to this congregation, gathering us around his precious means of grace, shaping us together for his good and gracious purposes. It is the Potter who sets before us the work of reaching out to others with his saving gospel. Are we doing these things? Remember who we are and what we are. We are sinners who by ourselves can't do anything right. We are worthless clay. "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." Lord our God, carry out your mighty deeds, the salvation of souls, in spite of us and through us.

Today we begin the Advent season. Advent means "coming", and these few weeks before Christmas we prepare to celebrate the coming, the birth of our Savior. The only proper way to prepare for him is to repent, to honestly recognize our uncleanness, our unworthiness and the filth of our sin. Only with humble and contrite hearts are we ready to receive our Savior and the forgiveness he won for us. "O LORD,...We are the clay, you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand." Lord, you have made us your people in Christ. Continue to shape and form us, so that we ever repent of our sins, trust in you alone for help and deliverance, and gladly live according to your ways, serving you with our lives. In our Savior's name.

Amen.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever.  
Amen.