

## Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 11:1-10

If someone's hand was coming at your face in the shape of a fist, that would be reason for alarm. But if that hand coming at you was open, gentle, and intending on giving a loving touch, your response would not be one of alarm, but of comfort.

The hand in the shape of a fist is our Isaiah reading for today from the Old Testament. The open, gentle hand is our Gospel reading from St. Mark. Both readings speak of the coming of the Lord. But the first reading portrays our Lord as a clenched fist coming in judgment. The second reading portrays our Lord coming gently, on a donkey, not to strike, but to comfort.

*"Oh that You would rend the heavens and come down,"* cries Isaiah, *"that the mountains might quake at Your presence, as when fire kindles brushwood, and the fire causes water to boil...that the nations might tremble at Your presence..."* Do you see the clenched fist in these words? Mountains quake, fire erupts, the nations tremble. God is about to strike His people in the days of the prophet Isaiah, for they have turned away from Him. They have not been faithful in worship. They have not been respecting the Lord's house, the Lord's day, the Lord's name, or the Lord's commandments. God was angry. *"Behold, You were angry,"* says Isaiah, *"and we sinned."*

What happens to your body when you are angry? Doesn't it tighten up? Your face and forehead, your teeth and jaw - these become rigid, as do your limbs. And what about your hands? Anger tightens the hands, drawing them into a fist, making them ready to strike. And so God's anger at His people, for turning away from Him, made Him tight, clenched, drawn, ready to strike in judgment.

Yet anger is not hatred. Anger can come from hate, but it can also come from love. And so understand that God's clenched fist here is a fist of love. In fact, had God not drawn His hand into a fist, this would have shown that He hated His people. They were turning away from Him. They were on the road to perishing. They were going to die in their sins. At this point, an open, gentle hand would have been the worst thing for them. It would not have been loving at all.

If someone is choking on a piece of food, they don't need a gentle, loving touch. They need force. They need a fist into the gut. God's people were choking to death on their sins. To show love, God acted in anger. He struck with His fist. He threw His people into captivity; into sorrow and misery.

We would be fools to say that we have no need of God's fist today. Every day, it seems, someone in the media or in politics is charged with sexual assault or harassment. Teachers are caught having affairs with their students pretty regularly as of late. And these just deal with the Sixth Commandment. There are nine other commandments being trampled underfoot as well.

Our nation is choking to death on its sins. And not just them out there; we in here as well. We have turned away from God. It shows in our worship attendance. It shows in our giving, in our volunteering and in our lack of love for others. It shows in our lack of desire for reading the Scriptures and studying them. It shows in our lack of hunger for the Sacrament. Our sins are choking us to death. But we think nothing of it. "This, too, will pass," we think.

No it won't. We cannot un-choke ourselves. We need God's fist. We need God to be angry at us, not to pat us softly on the back and say: No worries; you're doing fine; no need for any changes in your life; no need for you to repent.

A soft, gentle hand can be the most unloving thing of all. We need God's fist, and we need it now. And may God the Holy Spirit use this word of law we are hearing today as a fist. May He act in love in this way toward each one of us.

And you know, after God comes as a fist, He comes to comfort. And thus we see in St. Mark a different hand. We see God's hand open and gentle. He comes riding on a donkey, not a warhorse. Crowds lay their cloaks on the road. Others spread leafy branches. They are all shouting, "*Hosanna!*" No one here is trembling. No mountains are quaking. There are no fires burning. Who would not love this story? This is how God is coming to us - in a gentle, comforting way.

Where is God's fist here? He has relaxed it. No longer clenched, it is open and soft. And you know why? Because those open, soft hands would be nailed to a cross. Jesus was riding that donkey toward Calvary and the cross. He did not tighten His fists in anger when they crucified Him. His hands were gentle and open. He embraced the cross with them. He embraced it because in doing so, He was embracing you.

Now there is a hard, angry fist in the crucifixion. God the Father came with it against His beloved Son. The fist of judgment hit Jesus. He deflected that fist away from you to Himself. God unleashed His anger upon Jesus. He was punished in your place and mine. Your Lord took the punishment out of God's hand. And so today, God's open hand comes to you sprinkling the water of Baptism over you. His hand opens in the Sacrament, feeding you with His holy body and blood. God's gentle hand today is bestowing to you the gifts of the cross He won for you: forgiveness, life, and salvation.

There is a place for God's fist in your life and mine. We need to fear His harsh Law to un-choke us; to bring us to repentance; to bring us back to our baptism. We need this often, daily, for you and I are sinners. But there in that sacred water of Baptism God's fist relaxes. There we see Jesus' open hands, His wounded hands. There He gently wraps them around you; a touch of true love. "You are forgiven," He speaks to each one of you, "My hands and My feet were nailed to a cross for you. God was angry, yes, for you sinned. But see My hands. I felt His anger for you. God is at peace with you."

My friends, Advent is now upon us. Advent means *coming*. Jesus is coming. On Judgment Day He will bring His fist down upon this world. But do not fear. He keeps you within the wounds of His gentle hands. That's where you are today. Here in the Divine Service His hands are open to you, embracing you. You are baptized. Here is His Supper for you. Here are His words of life to you. Jesus comes to you now in these holy things so that, with open hands, He will receive you on the Last Day. Amen.