

A Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent
The Rev. Robin Teasley

*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!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
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.
You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
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.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.* *Isaiah 64:1-9*

We are at the end of Thanksgiving weekend, a holiday that for most of us looked very different this year, and today we begin the season of Advent. I don't know about you, but I'm ready for some hope and expectation. But then we hear the assigned readings. And it all sounds like just what we would expect in 2020.

The prophet Isaiah has journeyed back from long captivity in Babylon with the exiled people of Israel and comes to find Jerusalem in ruins and the temple destroyed. They are devastated by the loss and we hear Isaiah lamenting on behalf of Israel:

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!

And in today's psalm we hear these words of lament:

*O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angered
despite the prayers of your people?
You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.¹*

And if that's not enough, we hear this from Mark's gospel:

Jesus said to his disciples, In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.²

On this first Sunday of Advent, as we begin to prepare for the arrival of the Savior, we hear of calamity and loss, grief and disappointment in a world where everything has gone wrong. Perhaps this year more than ever, the Advent readings resonate with us. The season of Advent is intentionally designed to remind us of *why* God sent Jesus the Christ to live among us. The lessons and hymns we hear during Advent are carefully chosen not only to help avoid rushing through December to Christmas Day, but also to give us some space, some time to ponder why it is that we need God to intervene in our lives.

The past year has been remarkably difficult, and in the church a new year begins today. We enter this new year with the help of scripture, in a posture of lamentation. It's an opportunity to push the reset button, to admit where we've gone wrong, and to commit to trying again, to being more aware of God's hopes and expectations, rather than to our own all too human desires. We are encouraged to let go of all of our denial, self-righteousness, or stubbornness, as we allow the radical honesty of scripture to make us honest, too. During Advent, we stop pretending everything is just fine. We come to the end of ourselves and face reality. And maybe that part is easier this year; we've been working on accepting a new reality since last March. We've had some practice.

The Advent readings declare in no uncertain terms that our world is not okay, and it is not okay that God seems to be absent from it. With Isaiah, we sometimes accuse God of hiding from us. We are surrounded by injustice, suffering and loss, and we're half afraid our faith won't hold up to the challenges and anxieties that are new every morning. Often this is when we hide from God. And while we might long for God to tear open the heavens and come down to straighten out everyone else, we are less sure we want God straightening out our own mess. That's a bit more terrifying, because we know that it means things will have to change.

¹ Excerpt from Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

² Excerpt from Mark 13:24-37

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! Is there something on our minds this week that might embolden us to say these words to God? When have we wanted to lament and cry out to God to come and make things better?

My short list would be for God to end this pandemic, empower scientists to produce a highly effective vaccine, and direct government officials to ensure that everyone who contracts the COVID virus would have quick and affordable access to healthcare. My heart aches for those who have lost loved ones, jobs and businesses; for medical staff that is worn and weary. We are in need of healing and hope on so many levels. O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, O Lord!

Like Isaiah, I want to see God do something about this mess. Like the psalmist, I want to remind God about my own bowl full of tears. I want to tell Jesus that this business of waiting and watching and keeping awake (and keeping six feet apart, and washing hands, and wearing masks, and missing loved ones) is too hard and that I'm about at the end of my rope. What hard things do you want to be honest about with God?

Advent is a time when we are given permission to tell the truth, to let down our guard and make ourselves vulnerable. Maybe this season we can lament all that is not right in the world, honestly admit our part in it, and our responsibility for it. Maybe in Advent we can admit that we are still in need of a Savior and take seriously the need to wake up and prepare for the coming of Christ, paying attention – waking up - to the times and places where opportunities for mission and ministry present themselves.

This is where the hope and expectation come in, precisely when we call upon God to help us and to show us the future God is imagining for us. Isaiah reminds us that we are clay and God is the potter, and that we are in perpetual need of reworking. We can hope and expect that God will remake us over and over, as many times as we need in our human frailty.

We will still have to continue our watching and waiting, we will still need to accept change where we might rather not, but in the meantime, we can spend our time serving “the least of these” and loving our neighbors. We can look for the star, walk alongside the shepherds, open our door to strangers in need of care, listen for the angels, and watch for Christ, who always comes to us in the most unexpected ways. When we can be honest with God, we just might be helping God tear open the heavens and come into a world that is still in need of healing, restoration, and love. Amen.