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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

First Sunday in Advent (Series B)

November 30, 2014

Text: Isaiah 64:1–9

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our Advent season begins with a raucous reading from that stately prophet of Judah's royal court, Isaiah. It's an edgy reading filled with angst, drama, and nail-biting anticipation. For the next few moments, I encourage you to set aside your calm 21<sup>st</sup> century demeanor and listen to these ancient words with the zeal of an ancient mystic anticipating divine intervention.

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountain might quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!” Come down God! Rip the heavens to shreds and make the mighty mountains shake in fear at your glorious presence. Stir things up with your awesome might. Show yourself strong and terrible in mighty deeds. Set this world ablaze like a forest fire ripping through the dead, dried out underbrush. And make your presence so hot that it brings the waters of the earth to boil. Then, maybe the nations might come to attention and repent of their horrific deeds. Your enemies would bow before you in all your Divine majesty. Come down God and shake heaven and earth!

Do you ever have moments when you want to pray something like that? Maybe it's when we hear of another senseless tragedy. When evil men decapitate helpless prisoners in the name of a false god – Allah; when evil men turn their guns upon innocent children in schools; when I read another story of human trafficking, modern slavery; when men, women, and children who bear the name of Jesus suffer torment, slander, and even death because they are Christians. On we could go. God come down in righteous and set this world straight. And don't spare an ounce of divine justice and power.

Sound a bit intense especially now that we're into the holiday season? Maybe we need to be shaken out of our own doldrums. The apostle John saw a vision of God's people praying for vindication in Revelation 6:9–11, “When he (the glorified Jesus) opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word

of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.” These are the prayers of martyred saints asking God “How long, Lord? Vindicate your people; bring an end to all this senseless evil.”

Isaiah continues by declaring that God has come down before, on Mount Sinai. Vs. 3, “When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.” Exodus 19 describes God’s descent upon Mount Sinai in order to give Moses the Law. The people of Israel were terrified at God’s presence. He gave them His holy Law and established Israel as His chosen, covenant people. So do that again! That’s what Isaiah is praying for. Come down again, Lord God of heaven and earth.

Isaiah anticipates this coming with great eagerness, as an unparalleled event beyond human imagination. Vs. 4, “From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.” Isaiah confesses that God acts on behalf of those who trust in Him, who wait for His salvation. And His salvation transcends human thought or perception. God’s actions are unique. Who would have conceived of a plan for God’s Son to become man through a virgin mother, live a perfect life and faithfulness and obedience only to die by means of horrific crucifixion, and rise again from the dead three days later? In those remarkable events, God was shaking heaven and earth for the sake of His beloved people. In Jesus, God is acting to save those who wait for Him in faith.

It is this God, who performs deeds beyond human imagination, that meets with His people of faith and righteousness. Vs. 5a, “You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways.” Those who work righteousness are believers who look to God for every good and perfect gift in faith and trust. Only those who have faith in Jesus do righteous works for Scripture teaches that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Faith is the key! And Scripture teaches that faith is a joyful, busy, active gift given to God’s people by God Himself. These 5 verses of Isaiah are a mighty prayer of faith!

But any prayer of vindication must also rightly recognize the inherent problem that infects every human heart and soul. A righteous prayer requesting God to intervene in

heaven and earth most also confess that sin and disobedience lurk within the lives of every saint of God. Isaiah begins his comprehensive prayer of repentance in 5b, “Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time and shall we be saved?” This is no momentary slip up, an oopsy of no consequence! We have been in our sins a long time, says Isaiah.

A true heart of repentance recognizes that any prayer of divine intervention must also include one’s own life, maybe even beginning with one’s own life. That’s the force of Jesus’ famous teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about getting the log out of your own eye first, before trying to get that little speck out your neighbor’s eye (Matthew 7:1–3).

Isaiah even asks that haunting question that people are so often afraid to ask when confronted with the eternal gravity of their sinful hearts and minds, “...in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?” Being the evangelical pastor that I am, I want immediately to say “Yes, you will be saved in Jesus.” But Isaiah cautions me and us about being too hasty with our proclamation of grace and salvation. Don’t slough off sin so dismissively, as if were really no big deal.

Vs. 6, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” What sin and iniquity has done to us is to make us unclean and empty, devoid of lasting gravity and substance. Isaiah uses two images; both are disturbing in their unique ways. The first image: Our sin has made us unclean like the cloth used during a woman’s menstrual cycle. The second image: The sinner is a dried out, lifeless leaf being blown away by every gust of wind. Unclean lifelessness is the result of sin. Don’t be fooled by the devilish lie that says sin brings fulfillment and joy!

But it gets worse for sin destroys the fellowship God created people to enjoy with Himself. Vs. 7, “There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.” It is impossible for sinners to call upon God in their own strength. Dead in sin and at war with God is how the New Testament describes sinful humanity. And Isaiah adds a most disturbing image of melting away because of our sin. Like wax before a flame...that’s what we’ve become as sinners before God.

After considering all that, we might be inclined to rethink praying such a vigorous prayer as “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down...” That too would be

a mistake. Shall we be saved was Isaiah's question in the midst of confessing sin. And the answer is yes! We shall be saved when God comes down! Vs. 8, "But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." When God comes down to save His people He does so as a Father embracing His children. Those children may need discipline, a good taking out to the woodshed. But the Father's discipline of His children is never as an out-of-control maniac but as one who does all things for the good of His beloved children. That's one way of describing God coming down.

The other in this verse is that of the potter making a clay vessel. God comes down to take us into His own hands in order to shape and mold us, like a potter with soft clay, into something we couldn't be without Him. Whereas sin and iniquity defiles us and takes away our substance and vitality, God takes us into His own hands and makes us into something new. The New Testament calls Christians a new creation. And that's what God does when He comes down. In Jesus, all things are made new!

Isaiah ends with one final request for mercy in vs. 9, "Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people." God's anger over our sin is satisfied on Good Friday. There, on Calvary's cross, iniquity is swallowed up in God's righteous life and love. God came down in Jesus to gather unto Himself a redeemed people. God ripped the heavens apart on that day when a virgin mother believed that impossible angelic message, "You will give birth to Christ the Lord who will save His people from their sins." In less than 4 weeks, we will celebrate the day that this divine invasion became known to the world.

Come down, O God, and save your redeemed people. Extend your kingdom through your might Word and Sacraments. Create for yourself a holy people who joyfully work righteousness through faith in your Son, the Lord Jesus. Come down, O God, and rend the heavens again!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.