

Tear Open the Sky and Come Down

Isaiah 64:1-8

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Our text from Isaiah has been a common reading for Advent at least since the Middle Ages: “O that you would rend the heavens and come down!” That’s because Advent has always been a season of yearning for God to come down to us as well as a season of looking forward to the celebration of the time when God *did* come down—not with power that made the mountains shake and burn with fire, but in weakness, in human form, as a helpless baby.

It is not too hard for us to visualize this scene. We demand of God: “Rip open the sky and come down!” For the ancient Israelites, the sky above was a tent spread out by God, or perhaps the floor of God’s tent. God was being asked to tear the fabric of the tent, to open up a hole in the sky and get down here. It was time for God to stop ignoring us, doing whatever he was doing up there in heaven and get his butt down here. Come down the way you did before when you came down on Sinai, when there was fire on the mountain and the earth shook, when you met with Moses and gave him the tablets, when you made a covenant with us as a people. Do it again!

We have been exposed to so many Hollywood special effects that we can actually imagine the sky being ripped apart—not just the clouds but the blue of the sky being torn to reveal behind the sky another dimension which has been hidden all this time: the realm of the other, the holy, that parallel universe of being which is the source and sometimes the power behind this one. And through that rip in the fabric of the universe comes a superhero named Yahweh in a blaze of fire, streaking down into our midst so bright as to be invisible, making the mountains of Southern California shake back and forth as if in fear, igniting a brush fire, causing water to boil in desert ponds. Actually, Yahweh looks more like an alien invader than a hero. I’m not sure whether to be glad to see him or terrified.

But the people of ancient Jerusalem are not so ambivalent. To them it is clear that if God comes down from heaven, he will stomp their enemies. That’s what God did in the past, when he routed the Egyptians, when he sent the tribes living in Canaan running, when he made walls fall, stung like hornets, sent plagues and parted water. The power of God was on our side in those days.

But here is the problem: these people who are praying (their inner thoughts expressed by the prophet) are disappointed with God. They knew that God had done great things for his people in the past, but they had lived through a long period of national decline. The peak of Israel’s power was ancient history to them. Generations ago the nation had divided in two. Then the north was overrun by the Assyrians. In their own grandparents’ time, the south, including Jerusalem, had been destroyed by the Babylonians and the elite of the country were taken as captives to Babylon for reeducation. It was the greatest mystery of their national life that the God who gave them the land would allow it to be taken away, and that the God who inhabited the Temple would allow it to be destroyed.

But nothing lasts forever, even Babylon. When the Persians gained the upper hand (the Iranians dominant over the Iraqis, to use their current names) the hearts of the Jews soared. This was good news from God. It was like another Exodus. They would be delivered from captivity and led back to the Promised Land. And so it was, but by the time of this prayer in Isaiah 64, the people have settled back in Jerusalem—only to find things worse than they expected, the Temple

in ruins and the rebuilding difficult because of divisions among Jews and conflicts with others who had moved in, and of course a shortage of money. Why didn't God do anything now? Where was his mighty hand? Why didn't he return his people to their former glory?

Those were questions that were still in the air in the time of Jesus centuries later. They are questions the disciples asked Jesus. When is God going to make everything right? When is God going to come down from heaven and fix things? What even the disciples could not see was that God *had* come down, but his way of fixing things was not by military power or destruction of enemies. His way of fixing things was by suffering, by enduring death and still loving, then defeating the power of death and the fear of death which paralyzes us. Jesus was not God coming the way people hoped, but he did bring God's reign to earth. Jesus was a *disappointing* God, and he established what was for most a disappointing kingdom, one that grew secretly, one that permeated the existing order like yeast or salt. So we still ask—even with hope in the air during Advent—God, why don't you *do* something? Why don't you *really* come down like in the old days? To some extent, that is what we mean when we pray "Thy kingdom come." May you reign in fullness. May you take over. Because right now it's not clear if *anybody* is in charge. If anyone *is* in charge, they must be evil.

The Israelites in Isaiah's prayer make a leap that we hesitate to make. If things are this messed up—if God *doesn't* fix things—then he must be angry with us. And God must be angry for a reason. Then they admit what we in our optimistic age rarely admit: we deserve what we are getting. The world is screwed up because *we* are screwed up. We have met the enemy and he is us.

Now I have to tell you that there are a couple of places in the Hebrew text where it seems that the people are blaming God for their fall into sin. In verse 5, the NRSV reads "because you hid yourself we transgressed." Since you made yourself invisible—like that absent landlord in Jesus' parables—we decided to go our own way and ignore you. It's your fault, God: if you had made yourself known to us we might have obeyed you.

In the previous chapter, in 63:17, it's more blatant:

*Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways
and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?*

God made us do it. How is it that God hardened our hearts and made us stray? He disappointed us. He let the Temple be destroyed. We might not phrase it that way, but I've heard plenty of people say that they stopped going to church or lost their faith because God let them down. In other words, it's not my fault I don't believe in God—blame God for not doing his job. Even though I no longer think he exists, I'm still disappointed in him.

And yet on some level we know that we as a people are wicked, the Israelites say. We did leave God. We stopped obeying his commandments. We stopped taking him seriously, even if it was because of disappointment. Here is our state as a people: we are all like the unclean—like the lepers, the dead, the pigs, all the things that were not allowed in the Temple or into God's presence. As the first Isaiah said when he saw the Lord, "I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." But here the corruption of the society is even worse. What we think of as good deeds are so polluted that they are like filthy rags to you, God.

The new translation called the Common English Bible renders verse 6 literally from the Hebrew: "We have all become like the unclean; all our righteous deeds are like a menstrual rag." Not "minstrel" like Mr. Bojangles; "menstrual" as in period. We are so sanitary and pre-packaged and deodorized now, we can hardly imagine how nasty a thing Isaiah had in mind when he spoke of the rags that women in his day used during their periods. When I was in

college I worked at the student center in the cleaning crew. I didn't mind mopping the floors or cleaning the grease off the grill, but I prayed that I would not be assigned to the ladies' room because there were little boxes there beside the toilets. The stench that came from those boxes was what Isaiah had in mind when he described what God thinks of all our so-called good deeds.

The truth, Isaiah says on behalf of the people, is that we are nasty boys. We are rotten. We are not just slightly imperfect. We are not people who "made a few mistakes." We are people who live for ourselves as if God were not a factor and as if God will never return. The truth is that no one even calls out to God anymore. No one even tries to know you anymore. And the reason—at least the reason we tell ourselves—is that you have hidden your face from us. You haven't come down. You haven't shown yourself. Instead you have given us over to our own sins.

It's hard to know how to take a prayer like this. We moderns expect our prayers to be straightforward, and our religious writing to be full of self-help and optimism. Isaiah's writing, like much of the Bible, is much more sophisticated than that. It's multidimensional, multivalent, complex, ironic, so that you have to figure out which parts to take as true and which parts to take as a straw man the prophet will knock down in the next two chapters. But for the most part, I take this prayer as an honest expression of the spiritual state of the people—disappointed in God, disappointed in themselves, and blaming God for their own sin.

I wonder how many of us are in the same spiritual state. Certainly our nation is in a deep funk of disappointment, and not just with leaders or legislators but with the nation itself. Why can't someone do something—or why can't God do something—to return the nation to its former glory? Everyone knows, just like the people in Jerusalem, that it's not going to happen. History has moved on. No one wants to use Jimmy Carter's term and call it a "national malaise," but it's the same kind of bumping up against our limitations that we experienced in the late 70's—and a much more profound experience of bumping up against the reality of corruption in business and politics. And yet, for the most part, we blame *them*, whoever they are: the other party, the Tea Party, Occupy demonstrators, the 1%, the freeloaders, the unions, the immigrants, the corporations, the Congress. Maybe they all share blame for our mess.

But the move Isaiah prompts us to make—just like the rest of the prophets—is to recognize that blame falls on us. However bad the enemy, we ourselves have been selfish. We ourselves have drifted from our principles. We ourselves have closed our lives to God's influence and then blamed him for making it so. The truth is that our society stinks to high heaven but we don't want to say so. When the Muslims say so, we say they hate our freedom. But if we will listen, our own prophets tell us the same thing—including Jesus, including Paul, including James. We think we are so good, but we stink like—well—filthy rags.

The spirit of Advent in the Christian calendar has always been a spirit of repentance. That is why the color is purple, like Lent. Yes, Advent is about expectant hope, but it is hope that God will come. It is hope that Jesus will return in glory. And when he comes, he will judge both the living and the dead. If we expect Jesus to come, we'd better get ready. Yes, we want you to tear open the sky and come down; yes, we want your kingdom to come. Lord, make us ready.

There is one more move that Isaiah makes, though, turning on a dime. There is one more appeal to God after accusing him of hiding himself and giving us over to our sins. "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." In spite of all our disappointment with you, in spite of all your disappointment with us, the fact remains that you, God, are our Father. You are our creator. You made us humans and you made us your people. You shaped each of us as individuals. Nothing can change that, so that is the

basis of our cry for mercy. Jesus picks up that cry to God as “our Father,” which is very rare in the Old Testament, and makes it his own—and ours.

He is the potter. We are the clay. The potter is shaping us through the forces of history—the exile in Babylon, the destruction of the Temple; the globalization of the economy, the meltdown on Wall Street. The Lord, the potter, shapes us through pressures and losses we see as tragedy. Harbor Church is clay being shaped by the potter—not into its former shape, not to restore its glory as it understands glory, but into the image of his Son. So each of us is being pressed and squeezed, trimmed and molded, into something we cannot imagine, which God has imagined for us.