

***How God Came Down:  
God's Refusal to Answer Our Prayers for Vengeance***

Isaiah 64, Philippians 2:5-11

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One of the Old Testament texts that is read commonly during the Advent season is the prayer of Isaiah with which we began the service: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" That catches something of the spirit of Advent—a longing, even a desperation for God to come down and show himself to us. Isaiah imagines that God is "up there," above the firmament in the heavenly realm, but he seems to imagine a situation in which God is ignoring him. If you read the end of Isaiah 64, you see that the prophet is standing the midst of a Jerusalem which has become a desolation; the temple has been burned by fire. He asks Yahweh, "After all this, will you restrain yourself?" (64:12). John Wesley paraphrased this with the question "Do none of these things move thee to take vengeance?"

Most of us have felt that way: that God was far away and unresponsive. We wish God would rip open the sky and fly down here like Superman to rescue us. So we beg him, "Please get down here and get to work!" We are a bit like those prophets of Baal that danced around the woodpile on Mount Carmel begging their god to come down in fire, even cutting themselves to get his attention, prompting Elijah to taunt them: "What, you think he might be asleep? Maybe he had to go to relieve himself."

Now even the true prophet Isaiah and his community are praying for God to come down. Verse 3 reminds him—and us—that God did come down in the old days. Like all Israelites, Isaiah thought of the Exodus when God did awesome deeds in bringing the people out of Egypt and slavery. He remembers Yahweh coming down onto Mount Sinai to meet Moses, while the people kept their distance and the mountains quaked and burned with fire. This is a prayer something like "Do it again, Daddy!"

But when God comes down, what will it be like? He will come down in terrifying fire, this prayer imagines. Yahweh will make his name and his power known to his enemies and all the nations will tremble at his presence. If you are standing at Ground Zero—as Isaiah was—it's understandable that you would want God to come down in power and do something to your enemies who have destroyed the temple. But it is not all that unusual for people to pray that God would come down specifically for the purpose of zapping his enemies—which just happen to be our enemies as well.

Some scholars say that Isaiah 64 reflects the idea of God as a warrior. In Isaiah 42:13 (CEB) you find that theme: "The Lord will go out like a soldier, like a warrior God will stir up rage. God will shout, will roar; over enemies he will prevail." Do you remember the Song of Moses after the Exodus? "The Lord is a warrior; Yahweh is his name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea... Your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries; you sent out your fury, it consumed them like stubble" (Exodus 15: 3-4, 6-7 NRSV). The song of Deborah in Judges has the same martial tone: "Lord... when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens poured... the mountains quaked before Yahweh, the one of Sinai" (Judges 5:4-5 NRSV).

So we can imagine centuries later, when Israel has stopped winning, when the miracles seem to have dried up, when the temple where the holy Yahweh lived has been reduced to rubble, the question comes up: Where are you, God? When are you going to do what you did in the old days? They liked to think that God was going to wake up from his slumber and bring vengeance upon their enemies. Although, I have to say, even in Isaiah's community there is another stream of thought you see in Isaiah

53 and the songs of the suffering Servant. Maybe God's not going to act in power in the way that we hope for; maybe this time God is going to do something redemptive with our suffering and his own.

Still, there are plenty of prayers in the Old Testament that assume that when God comes down as we pray, he will be a consuming fire and burn up our enemies. Psalm 97:3 says "Fire proceeds before him, burning up his enemies on every side." Some of the prayers in the Psalms are pretty shocking to us: "Stand up, Lord! Save me, my God! In fact, hit all my enemies on the jaw; shatter the teeth of the wicked!" (3:7 CEB). Or: "Let death devastate my enemies; let them go to the grave alive" (55:15 CEB). Or: "Let God rise up; let his enemies scatter...like wax melting before fire, let the wicked perish before God" (68:1-2 CEB). The psalmists start out by praying destruction for Yahweh's enemies, but pretty soon you realize that these are prayers against *my* enemies. Psalm 143:12 is a scary example of what our prayers can become: "Wipe out my enemies because of your faithful love. Destroy everyone who attacks me, because I am your servant."

There was a long history of praying for God to come down, but it was often a prayer for vengeance, that God will kick the people who kicked me, asking God to be the even bigger bully who beats up the guy who bullied me. Don't think that this is something peculiar to Jews. Yesterday was Pearl Harbor Day. On December 8 (72 years ago today), don't you think there were a few prayers going up for vengeance? If you look at some of the news reels and war bond advertisements from that period now, you see to what extent we demonized our enemies. I have no doubt that good Christians prayed for God to destroy them. My own grandfather was furious when my father decided to go to Japan as a missionary; he was a devout Methodist Sunday School teacher, but he thought we should let those Japanese go to hell like they deserve. And if you think back to September 11, 2001, I know there were some mature prayers for comfort and peace and justice, but I bet there were a good many people asking God to do to Al Qaeda what they had done to us.

So we can understand, I think, why people who have been attacked—and even more so, people who have been defeated—would look to God to avenge what had been done to them. They imagine that if God came down he would come down and set things right by force. Of course, that is what many Jews assumed in the time before Jesus was born. When they looked for a Messiah, they looked for God to come as a Warrior King with supernatural power to overthrow the pagan foreigners who had taken over their land.

But what Christians remember at this season is that when God did in fact come down—after a period when he seemed aloof or dormant in Israel's history—he did not come down the way Isaiah wanted and expected him to come down. God did not come down to destroy his enemies, or ours. When God came down, it was altogether different. That early church hymn which was already in circulation by the time Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians, around 61 AD, tells a very different story about God coming down. We read it together earlier. "He did not consider equality with God something to hold onto, or something to be used for his advantage, but he emptied himself of his power and status and took the form of a servant—even a slave. Finding himself in human form, he humbled himself further still and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

That is the real story of how God came down. The gospels spell out the details: he lived with the powerless and the outcast, he had no weapon against his enemies but his words, he taught us to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, to turn the other cheek to those who slap us and disrespect us, to walk the second mile to the oppressor who forces you to carry his pack for one mile. When God came down, God chose to come in weakness and to model for us what it means to love those who hate us, which is what God does at every moment.

God did not answer the prayer of Israel that God would destroy their enemies. I don't think he deferred it, either, to another time in history. I think that in Jesus God said a loud NO. No, I am not

coming as fire to destroy. No, I am not coming to lift up one nation at the expense of others. No, I will not hate sinners even though you think that is what defines me. I will show you what I am like: a friend of sinners, a friend of soldiers who teaches nonviolence, a friend of the rich who teaches giving up your wealth, a friend of Pharisees who tells them to stop looking in the Bible for life but to look at him to see what God is like.

I do not believe that God ever answers a prayer for vengeance, even though he is the one who will someday bring justice to this world. How could we possibly love our enemies and pray against them? How could we pray for those who attack us and still hate them? Jesus has told us the prayer that God answers: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Forgive all our unkindness to others to the same extent that we forgive our enemies.

The letters written to the earliest churches keep repeating that message, in two forms: forgive and you will be forgiven, as Jesus said; and forgive as you have already been forgiven yourself. We read a part of Romans 12: “Bless people who harass you—bless and don’t curse them...Don’t pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good. If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people. Don’t try to get revenge...Don’t be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good” (vs. 14, 17-19, 20 CEB).

Those are hard lessons to learn, I know. We have been reminded in the past couple of days that it is possible to learn them, though. Whenever people talk about the influence of Nelson Mandela, someone always brings up the subject, as Savannah Guthrie put it, of “radical forgiveness.” Mandela did not start out as a man who extended grace. He was a young man in hot pursuit of justice and, if necessary, revenge. He was jailed not because he was misunderstood but because he actually advocated and practiced terrorism as the only way to overturn an unjust government. But Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison, in terrible deprivation. He had lots of time alone to think about his own life and what would really make a difference in South Africa. He had been baptized Methodist and grew up Christian, but in prison his faith became deeper. He said that the only people who visited the prison were religious people: Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish. They all, in their own way, talked about forgiveness.

My favorite Mandela quote is this one: “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind I’d still be in prison.” Mandela told his biographer Rich Stengel of *Time* that he was different from Gandhi and King, because they came at nonviolence as a spiritual value; he came at it as a practical matter, that forgiveness and reconciliation was the only way for his society to survive and for living in freedom to be possible. It wasn’t, Stengel said, that Mandela wasn’t angry about what had been done to him. He had tremendous anger, but he hid that in order to work for peace. When Mandela became president, he had it in his power to have his enemies arrested and tried and even put to death, but he knew that it would destroy the nation—and, I would speculate, he knew that it would destroy his own soul. He didn’t want to go there. It wasn’t the way he wanted to live, even in his private life.

In 1994, before he was elected to office, with the white President de Clerk in the audience, Mandela gave a speech at the Easter celebration at the headquarters of the Zion Christian Church, one of the largest churches started by Africans. He began, “Easter is a festival of human solidarity, because it celebrates the fulfilment of the Good News, the Good News borne by our risen Messiah who chose not one race, who chose not one country, who chose not one language, who chose not one tribe, who chose all of humankind! We pray with you for the blessings of human solidarity, because there are so many who wish to divide us! We pray with you for the blessings of reconciliation among all the people of South Africa! We pray with you so that the blessings of peace may descend upon South Africa like a torrent! We pray with you that the blessings of love may flow like a mighty stream!”

Later in his speech, he came back to the subject of Jesus: "Each Easter marks the rebirth of our faith. It marks the victory of our risen Savior over the torture of the cross and the grave. Our Messiah, who came to us in the form of a mortal man, but who by his suffering and crucifixion attained immortality. Our Messiah, born like an outcast in a stable, and executed like criminal on the cross. Our Messiah, whose life bears testimony to the truth that there is no shame in poverty: Those who should be ashamed are they who impoverish others. Whose life testifies to the truth that there is no shame in being persecuted: Those who should be shamed are they who persecute others. Whose life proclaims the truth that there is no shame in being conquered: Those who should be ashamed are they who conquer others. Whose testifies to the truth that there is no shame in being dispossessed: Those who should be ashamed are they who dispossesses others. Whose life testifies to the truth that there is no shame in being oppressed: Those who should be ashamed are they who oppress others."

That, friends in how God came down. Mandela reminds us what it means to pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." May it be so.