

First Sunday in Advent; December 3, 2023
Isaiah 64:1-9
Wait with Israel's Prayer

**Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and come down.
Mountains then would quake because of your presence.
As fire ignites stubble and as fire makes water boil,
make your name known to your adversaries.
Then nations would quake in your presence.
You did amazing things that we did not expect.
You came down. Mountains quaked because of your presence.
From ancient times no one has heard.
No ear has understood.
No eye has seen any god except you,
who goes into action for the one who waits for him.
You meet anyone who joyfully practices righteousness,
who remembers you by walking in your ways!
But you were angry because we sinned.
We have remained in our sins for a long time.**

**Can we be saved?
All of us have become like something unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like a filthy cloth.
All of us have withered like a leaf,
and our guilt carries us away like the wind.
There is no one who calls on your name,
who rouses himself to take hold of you.
So you hid your face from us.
You made us melt by the power of our guilt.
But now, LORD, you are our father.
We are the clay, and you are our potter.
All of us are the work of your hand.
Do not be angry, LORD, without limit.
Do not remember our guilt forever.
Please look closely.
All of us are your people.**

Today we mark the beginning of the season of Advent. With Advent, we begin a new Church year. God is present with us today to hand his gifts to us, as he always faithfully does—not just at the start of new Church years or big festival days, but throughout the year. Every day. Every hour. Every fleeting moment we receive his eternal gospel.

As we do each Advent, we prepare ourselves. We do this not just for the celebration of Jesus' holy incarnation on that first Christmas Day. We also prepare ourselves for the glorious and triumphant return of Jesus as victorious King, as he has promised, on the Last Day.

In the Gospel, we heard the account of our Lord's triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. It is with this theme that the Church begins the new year. We find ourselves in an age where we are waiting in expectation and hope, living in the tension between our Lord's first coming and his second coming at the end of time. We wait and live by faith, not by sight.

Yet, in spite of not seeing our Lord and Savior in an easy, obvious way, our faith is continually nourished and made certain by the promises he has attached to his Word and Sacraments. As we receive these gifts, we remember our Lord Jesus, who entered Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday as God's plan of salvation unfolded. Jesus rode into the jaws of evil in order to remove our unrighteousness and replace it with his holiness through his death and resurrection.

The faithful who came before us in the days of the prophet Isaiah also lived by faith. They were still waiting for the first appearance of the Lord's Messiah. Their faithfulness is praised in the letter to the Hebrews. They lived in the first days, when God spoke through the prophets. We live in the last days, when God has also spoken to us through his own Son. They looked ahead to the Messiah's first coming; we look back in joy to his first and forward, in the faith of things unseen, to his second.

The words of God spoken to the Lord's Church through the prophets continue to be spoken to us in the inspired words of Scriptures. They speak to us about the Son of God. The words of the Spirit recorded by Isaiah are every bit as pregnant with Christ as was Mary, his virgin mother.

In the Word we heard from Isaiah 64, the prophet gives us an inspired prayer. It is a prayer which expresses the longings of God's people during the disastrous years when the Babylonian armies conquered Judah. They destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and many who were not slaughtered in the siege were taken away to Babylon.

But this prayer is not limited to those dark days, nor is it a prayer that lacks hope. It is also the prayer of the Church of all times—whenever she is surrounded by God's enemies and all appears hopeless. But what is a prayer, if not an expression of hope? It's a trust that the one to whom it is spoken is not only real and listening to it, but also has the power and the inclination to do something to address the needs and wants that are expressed.

In this way, the prayer of Isaiah and Israel is also our prayer. With him, we pray as we wait for our Lord and hope in faith:

Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and come down. Isaiah is asking God to split heaven wide open and show himself to his people on earth. An unbeliever cannot say such a prayer, for he does not think God exists. Nor can anyone who does not believe and trust in a creator God. Nor can anyone who might admit that there is a God who created, but think that God now simply stands far off, maybe admiring his work, but not getting involved in the needs of his creation.

But the God who created the world by the power of his spoken Word has not left us on our own while he watches, dispassionately detached, from a distance. In difficult times, it may certainly seem to us that God has forgotten us. But that's never true. He may simply not be giving us the answer we want, according to the calendar we create. Nevertheless, in faith we continue to pray, and wait, and pray some more.

We pray Isaiah's advent prayer: **Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and come down** to rescue us from our enemies. It is a prayer of longing for God's presence among us. So the first three verses of this prayer all end with a similar refrain. **Mountains then would quake because of your presence.** Then: **...make your name known to your adversaries.** And finally: **Then nations would quake in your presence.**

It is a frightening thing to ask almighty God to come down in judgment, isn't it? If even the mountains—things that have no feelings and cannot fear anything—quake and melt, how much worse will it be for sinners? So the letter to the Hebrews rightly explains: **Our God is a consuming fire.**

Nevertheless, we pray these words because the Scriptures give us these words to pray, knowing full well the consequence. And you do say this prayer. You say it at least once a week, a prayer for God to, in his time and according to his own righteous judgment, conquer and consume his enemies. You pray it every time you say the Lord's Prayer and say, "Your will be done." From the start, God does not want to destroy anyone. But it is his will to defeat his enemies in the end, and all who disbelieve and oppose him will be defeated, according to that will.

And what a vivid picture Isaiah gives us. Have you ever been in the middle of a fire? When I was in fifth or sixth grade, a local firefighter came to our school to teach us basic fire safety. At the end of his presentation, he asked if there were any questions. A classmate raised his hand and asked, "What's it like being in a fire? Is it cool?" And the firefighter said, "No. It isn't. So don't start any." Isaiah gave the same answer. Fire hot enough boils and vaporizes water, one of the most basic ingredients for human life.

That's how it will be with those things which oppress us in this world – including our own sins, the problems and hatred we receive from others, and all the temptations of devil, world, and ourselves. It would be great if they would simply go away like a mist, and leave us in peace. Sometimes God has done this in the past with Pharaoh at the Red Sea, at Mount Sinai, at Elijah's battle with the prophets of Baal, and throughout Israel's history. He will do it again, finally and completely.

So there is a narrow beam for us to walk carefully. In the first place, like our God, we want no one to be destroyed. We are called to pray for them, so that God might reach them, too, with his Word, and bring them to faith. We first pray to God for all to believe in his Messiah. Yet we also bow to his divine judgment against all his enemies who refuse. Our prayer, as we look back to the Savior's first coming and ahead to his second, is the same as Israel's who looked forward to both: that God would save us from our enemies, but also that all nations, including ours, will repent and call on the name of the Lord for forgiveness.

The old proverb goes, "Be careful what you wish for." That goes for prayer, too. Be careful what you pray for. Before you pray for God's judgment to come, be careful exactly what you pray for and how you pray for it. Because apart from Christ, he will come to judge you, too. Best not to ask him to judge sinners in general, because we are sinners, every bit as much as anyone else. In fact, though it shouldn't be so, sometimes Christians sin outwardly worse and more often than unbelievers. So, the focus of Isaiah's prayer turns from Israel's enemies to the Church herself, to the enemy within us. As God's people come into the Lord's presence, their sins become clear, and the prayer becomes a confession of sin and plea for forgiveness.

So we continue to pray with Isaiah and Israel: **You meet anyone who joyfully practices righteousness, who remembers you by walking in your ways! But you were angry because we sinned. We have remained in our sin for a long time. Can we still be saved? All of us have become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like a filthy cloth. All of us have withered like a leaf, and our guilt carries us away like the wind.** The gravity of Israel's own sin wiped away any self-righteous smirk anyone might have even thought of cracking. Even those who trust in the Lord and walk in righteousness are simultaneously stubborn and guilty, their best works made gross by their sin, their spiritual strength withered by their guilt. Believers are both righteous in God's eyes and thoroughly filthy at the same time. We are simultaneously saints and sinners.

But in saving faith, sinners who do believe look to the saving God, who will not only rip open the heavens in judgment but has also already ripped them open with salvation. It was an awesome thing, something we could never have imagined, and it has already happened. At the birth of Jesus, the heavens were literally ripped open, and the glory of the Lord appeared through his angels in the presence of the shepherds. But those shepherds did not melt away as God's enemies one day will. They were told to fear

not because God had come down from heaven to be their Savior and the Savior of all who believe.. They were told to rejoice, because the Christ, the Messiah, their Lord God had come to save.

We could say that the manner in which God came down was wonderfully unexpected. Who would have thought that God Himself would come to the world, clothed in the flesh of a baby? But this same prophet Isaiah predicted it. And God delivered it. He opened the heavens and sent his Son. And so Isaiah can also say, sinner that he is: **But now, LORD, you are our father. We are clay, and you are our potter. All of us are the work of your hand. Do not be angry, LORD, without limit. Do not remember our guilt forever. Please look closely. All of us are your people.** Sinners though we are, God sees none of it, even upon his closest divine inspection. Now he sees his people and forgets our guilt. He is our father, and we are his people. In this prayer, too, we join Isaiah and Israel as we wait.

In the liturgy of the Western Church, there is a song that echoes the angels' chorus on Christmas night, called the *Gloria* or *Gloria in Excelsis*. It is still the custom in many Christian churches to omit that song during the season of Advent, and to bring it back beginning on Christmas. Why? Because Advent looks ahead to the Lord coming down the first time to bless us with salvation. Advent is, in a way, a return to waiting for the Savior's first arrival, just like those in the Old Testament. Even though we live after the birth of Christ, we unite ourselves with them for a little while as we contemplate God's promises and fulfillment.

Admittedly, this makes Advent a spiritually complicated time. Observed correctly, Advent may seem like it could produce spiritual whiplash: looking back at the first coming but also uniting with Israel of old to look ahead...and then also looking ahead to the second coming and our final salvation. But for the believer, it's a joyful spiritual swivel, because everywhere you look, every way you look, is salvation. Because the Lord answers the Advent prayer of his people. He answered Israel's in more ways than one: Babylon was eventually destroyed by her enemies. Her great walls and palaces were burned up. And the Lord later brought back to the Promised Land a small group of exile survivors to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. That was one temporary and happy answer to their prayer for deliverance from their enemies. But the full answer to this prayer took place many years later, when blood and water flowed from the Eternal Rock, Jesus Christ. The moment Jesus gave up his spirit, the heavens were torn open again, and the mountains quaked. Matthew tells us: **The curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened.**

The first wait was over; the separation sin had caused between God and man was ended. And now we wait patiently in prayer and readiness, to celebrate the saving work of Jesus' coming, and for his second, when he will gather all the faithful to himself. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.