

Sermon 'Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down.'

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

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It is advent, and we begin to think of jingle bells and silent night and peace on earth. So romantic, if you are in the mood for it. But what if you are in the sombre, dark mood of Isaiah who only saw disasters in his personal life and the life of the people of God? Who only saw the absence of God?

How pray when the lights in the christmas tree burn brightly, but the lights in your life seem to go out?

1 Rend the heavens (vs1-2a)

Isaiah saw that Jerusalem and the Temple were in ruins, so he begged God: 'Please act in our time.'

God's home in the heavens is depicted as a gigantic tent from which God is asked to make his exit to save Israel and to install fear in the hearts of the enemies.

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you! (vs 1)

God seems hidden in the heavens; the tent is closed and has no opening; where is He when we need him most? So Isaiah begs God to tear the heavens open and come down to us. 'We need you.'

Believers in God throughout the ages have asked the same question. 'God help us; we are in need.' We sometimes experience our situation of need as the absence of God, don't we? This may not be the reality - but it is how we feel sometimes. Where is God?

Isaiah prays for God to rend the heavens, to come down, and for the mountains to tremble because of his coming. I think we should see in this light what happened on the day when Jesus died. In Mathew 27:51 we read:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split.

The curtain of the Holy of Holies was torn. Now this temple in Jerusalem was truly a "microcosm of the whole creation", to use the words of the Anglican theologian NT Wright. He says:

It was quite deliberately constructed so as to reflect the whole creation, the stars in the heavens on the one hand and the multiplicity of beautiful vegetation on the other. (Paul and the Faithfulness of God, 2013, p.101)

And outside all this, and totally invisible, God was as it were, living in the Holy of Holies - that resembled heavens, the abode of God.

When Jesus died, God rend the heavens - the curtain in the Temple was torn from top to bottom. As if God wanted to say: 'Now I am with my people. Thanks to Jesus Christ my Son, I can be with my people again.'

The people of Israel, through their prophet Isaiah begged God to come to them, to come to their rescue, and now, finally, He had come. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

At the beginning of this Advent time, we know that God has fulfilled the hope and expectations of his people. The waiting has not been in vain.

God has come very close to us.

Now we may know this, we may believe this; we may say it in sermons. But still... We have our dark moments where God seems so far. Think of your own problems and pains.

Where is God? Surely, we know he is not far away; but we would love to see him act. 'Do something to help me.'

2 Make your name known (vs2b-7)

In Isaiah's days, Israel was oppressed by Babylon. So he prayed:

Come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you, (vs 2b)

"Make your name known to your enemies." To know the name of God, to know Yahweh, the God of Israel, is more than simple knowledge of his characteristics. The word 'to know' in Hebrew is knowledge gained by experience.

Israel had knowledge of God by the experience of the Exodus in the first place. There they got to know him as the God who keeps his covenant and who is strong to save his people.

In the past, Isaiah said, "You did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you." (vs 3). Israel remembered how God saved them from Egypt. and this was something totally unexpected.

There is something unpredictable in God. We cannot predict what He will do, how He will come to save us, how He will act for our benefit. But we do know his character, as He has always shown mercy and grace to his people. He never acts out of line with his character.

Isaiah now prayed for God to save Israel again: 'As you did save us from Egypt, save us now from the Babylonians. Make the nations stop making our lives miserable.'

We know how *people* can make our lives miserable.
Or financial problems.
Or issues at work.
Or our health.

And with Isaiah we can pray that God will act again on our behalf. In Jesus Christ God has opened the heavens and He now lives with us. "But Lord, let me see it. I need your help in so many areas of my life...'

God works in unpredictable ways: we do not know *how* he will answer our prayers. But He will... he will. In that respect he is very *predictable*.

And when He acts, it is wonderful. Isaiah praised God for the Exodus from Egypt:

Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

The apostle Paul quotes the same words from Isaiah and shows the church in Corinth how God has acted on our behalf, through the Gospel. This is what he wrote:

We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"— these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. (1 Cor 2:7-10)

God's answer to the fate of Israel was the Exodus from Egypt. Isaiah asks for a similar liberation, now from the enemy of Babylon. And Paul shows that the ultimate answer of God to our situation of pain and problems and sin and fear and separation from God, is the Gospel. It has to do with the crucified Lord. With God suffering with and for his people.

That is when God tore the heavens open. That is when the Spirit of God came into our lives.

To do what? To solve all problems? I doubt it. For the apostles all problems were not solved. Yes, surely, they prayed to God when they were sick. They prayed to God to keep them safe. But Paul kept his thorn in the flesh, and all of the apostles died young, killed by their enemies.

Paul's responded to his own problems by prayer. The deepest answer he received from God, was tnot that his circumstance changed - but that he came to know God

better. The Spirit God gave to us, to his church, searches even the depths of God and makes the Creator-God known to us.

Just as Moses gave Israel a saving knowledge of God, so Isaiah prayed for the nations to know the name of God, and likewise Paul's deepest Gospel-answer for us today, is to know God through the cross of Jesus Christ.

3 Do not be so terribly angry (vs8-9)

Isaiah saw very clearly what the background to Israel's problems was. They disobeyed their God.

All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.(vs 6)

The suggestion here is not that all individuals are evil. There are many good and nice people. But collectively, as people of God, Isaiah says, 'we have done wrong, wrong, wrong.'

No wonder God is hiding; no wonder they had all these problems in their community.

God wanted Israel to make his name known in the world, and what have they done?

No one [in Israel] calls on your name
or strives to lay hold of you;
you have hidden your face from us
and have given us over to our sins.(vs 7)

God's people did not care about the name of God - they were to be a "holy people" but they did not hallow the name of the Lord.

Isaiah calls them unclean, and this is a severe reproach. They were unfit to serve God in his temple. Of course God could not leave the Holy of Holies. Of course the curtain had to separate the Holy God from the unclean, unholy people of God.

So what could Isaiah pray? Israel had no excuse and it was so reasonable for God to leave the people that did not want him, leave them to their own problems. He is not Santa - he is the Holy God!

But Isaiah begged God to be gracious.

Yet you, Lord, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord;
do not remember our sins forever.
Oh, look on us, we pray,
for we are all your people. (8-9)

This is a wonderful prayer, asking God to be gracious for the sake of his covenant. 'You are our Father, we are your people, so Lord, please, do not be too angry...'

Isaiah's prayer was answered by God, ultimately, when Jesus Christ came to us. Finally a man who lived a truly holy life for the glory of God. So God could tear the heavens open.

We may suffer from financial problems, sickness, from people who make our lives hard. But our ultimate problem is deeper. It is the human disease of not really obeying God but living for ourselves.

God has come down in Jesus Christ to solve our problem. He has come down to make his name known among the nations. He has come down to give us abundant life, now and forever more.

And yes, we pray for the many things that bother us today; much goes wrong in our life. How God will answer all those prayers, we do not know. We do know that the solution is, eventually, in nothing but the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Lord.

We pray today, with Isaiah, "You, Lord, are our Father. Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray. for we are all your people."

Conclusion

And exactly because we know of his grace and goodness, we will never stop asking him to also solve our temporary problems, of whatever sort they are. 'God, you are in our midst. Please let us experience this today; as you forgive our sins, we also ask you to help us in so many other areas where our lives need your support.'

In this Advent period, let us look forward to how God will act in our days. Let us pray for our daily bread, for health, for disturbed relationships to be healed. Let us pray for the areas in our life that must be changed. Let us pray that we will honor the name of God among the nations.

And we can pray all this in the certainty that God has actually already answered in his Son Jesus Christ; He has come down from heaven. And today in Holy Eucharist he again shows us the signs of his benevolence toward us. He gives us all we need.

Amen