

First Sunday in Advent
November 27, 2011
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Isaiah 64:1-9

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. 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. You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? 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. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins. Yet, O LORD, you 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, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people. (NIV)

In one of the books written by Elie Wiesel, where he talks about the tragedies of the concentration camps, he tells of one particularly disturbing image. He tells the story about a hanging which included even an eight-year-old child. He remembers one voice that stuck out, the voice of one in the crowd who was forced to watch. That voice cried out: “*Where is God?*” Perhaps at that moment these words of Isaiah would have also been fitting: “*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down.*”

We may have never encountered something as awful as a concentration camp but haven’t each of us at one time or another asked our God to step in, to intervene, to do something about a situation, to help us in our trouble? Have we ever thought or perhaps voiced the question: *Where is God?* There are times we want God to come in judgment. There are times we need the Lord to intervene in His grace. Don’t we want God to come to us and for us? Then, dear friends, we have gathered together at the right time in the church year for this is what the season of Advent is all about. This is what God’s Old Testament people waited for, and what we His New Testament people wait for - His coming. And God did not—and does not disappoint! This morning may our Christian prayer match the prayer of His prophet Isaiah. We turn to our Lord asking Him to: **Rend the heavens and come down.**

Isaiah lived in and prophesied about some pretty disturbing times for the people of Israel. During Isaiah’s lifetime the northern kingdom of Israel was soundly defeated by powerful Assyria. This heathen nation showed no mercy and wiped out the northern kingdom completely so that it would never be restored. And the Lord used Isaiah to prophecy what was coming next for the southern kingdom, for Judah. Another brutal and heathen nation would attack. Babylon will rise to power and will one day walk into Jerusalem and destroy God’s temple. Pagan people will carry God’s people into exile.

This background helps us understand as we listen again to this first part of Isaiah's prayer: "***Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. 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.***"

Isaiah is asking the Lord to intervene, to do something spectacular, something that will make God's enemies shake in their boots. This would not be out of the ordinary for God. This is the same God who sent 10 devastating plagues on Egypt, the God who opened the Red Sea and closed it again on the pursuing army, the God who shook the walls of Jericho to the ground, and God who once scattered the Canaanite armies with hailstones. God delivered His people again and again in miraculous ways. God did awesome things and saved them in unexpected ways before and Isaiah prays for such deliverance once again.

But Isaiah also makes it perfectly clear who the real enemy is here. The most dangerous enemy was not Assyria, it was not even Babylon. It was their sin. We have here one of the most eye-popping descriptions of how hopeless and helpless mankind really is because of sin. Isaiah writes: "***But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? 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. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.***"

There are different ways human beings try to come to God. Some think they can grasp God by human logic, others believe that union with God can be achieved through emotional experiences, and still more try to attain a relationship with the Lord by their morality and by doing good and refraining from evil. These are all what Martin Luther identified as ladder theologies. People think they can climb up to God. But the message of Advent completely reverses the direction. Salvation is not ever something we can ascend to! Right here we see why God must rend the heavens and come down. We see why God must come to us. We are completely lost in sin. Even the good things we think we can do are disgusting in God's eyes - they are as filthy rags that are useless and to be tossed in the trash. Sin separates us from God; it causes God to hide His face from us; it makes us waste away. I'm glad Isaiah doesn't just point the finger at the people of Israel here. He doesn't just hammer them here for their idolatry, wickedness, and rebellion. Isaiah includes himself when he admits: "***all of us have become like one who is unclean.***" All of us have sinned. None of us are worthy to stand before God on our own. Not Israel, not Isaiah, and certainly not us.

Permit me to use just a couple of examples of sinful humanity. You know how some people are always saying that in reality all people are good and honest at heart. In the summer of 1970, Delaware tried to prove it with an experiment. For 20 days, on the Delaware Turnpike, motorists were allowed to use an honor system. People without exact change were allowed to take return envelopes and mail in the money. But in 20

days, of more than 26,000 envelopes taken, can you maybe guess how many were returned? Only 582 were returned and according to the Associated Press some had in them stamps and pieces of paper instead of the payment. The experiment cost the state of Delaware a lot of money. Even those who paid, I'm sure they had thoughts about not paying, or thoughts that made them feel better than others - all our righteous acts are like filthy rags - even our good is tainted with sin.

We are selfish and self-centered by nature. If you were brave enough to battle some of the black Friday crowds perhaps you have some of your own examples, but I've talked to people who have had to work in stores and they say it gets pretty ugly. When they open the doors people will punch and shove, even elbow one another or start fighting to get the items they want. How's that for the Christmas spirit? Yet, don't these few examples remind us once again about the problem we, along with all humanity, have? Look what sin has done to us! We have all become like one who is unclean. We might even look around and ask "*Where is God?*," or say with Isaiah: "***How then can we be saved?***"

The answer to that question is coming, isn't it? God did an awesome thing once again. He acted in a way none of us could have ever expected. He would rend the heavens and come down. At the birth of Jesus, the heavens were literally rent. The glory of the Lord ripped open heaven in the presence of shepherds who were the first to hear the good news of great joy for all people - a Savior born to you. Where is God? Through the miracle of the incarnation, He is found right there in a feedbox so that one day we could find Him right there hanging on a cross. God is found standing outside His own tomb pointing out the fact it is empty. Jesus came to us and for us and that is why Isaiah gives Him the name Immanuel. He came to us and for us to pay for our sins. He came to save us from our most dangerous enemies in the most unexpected way.

And because of God's own Son we can continue this prayer of Isaiah. "***Yet, O LORD, you 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, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people.***" In Jesus, the good news is God remembers our sins no more. Through faith in Christ Jesus, our works are no longer filthy rags to be tossed into the trash. We are God's workmanship. Pray that God continue to shape and mold us and guide our lives in all we do.

Yes, at times things in this world leave us asking questions. But let us never ask the question: *Where is God?* For although we could have never reached God - He came down to us. He still comes to us through His Word and through His Sacraments. He comes to forgive us, to give us strength, to guide us, and to remind us that He is right here with us - always. God prepares us for any and every situation in life and for eternal life. This is what we celebrate in Advent. We celebrate His coming in grace. We look ahead to His coming again in judgment. God did rend the heavens and He will rend them again. He came for us, and He is coming for us. Amen.