

Oh, Rend the Heavens

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Hi, my name is Cody Texan. This is my wife Stevie. We're part of the North Berkeley Community Group.

Today's reading is from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 63, verse 15, and chapter 64, verses 1 through 12. Look down from heaven and see, from your lofty throne, holy and glorious.

Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us. 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.

[1 : 22] You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continue to sin against them, you are angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all of 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 have given us over to our sins.

Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are in 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.

O look on us, we pray, for we are all your people. Your sacred cities have become a wasteland. Even Zion is a wasteland. Jerusalem, a desolation. Our holy and glorious temple, where our ancestors praised you, have been burned with fire.

And all that we treasured lies in ruins. After all this, Lord, will you hold yourself back? Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure? The grass withers and the flowers fade.

[2 : 38] But the Lord, our God, stands forever. Thank you, Cody and Stevie. Good morning, everyone. I'm Andrew, one of the pastors here. Will you join me in prayer as we take a look at what God has to say to us this morning?

God, we pray that you would fill us with this kind of urgency, to have the heavens just rend apart and for you to come down.

Give us that kind of urgency, God. And Lord, when we all come before you with this question of like, where are you? Where's your zeal? Where's your might?

Will you be far? Will you hold yourself back forever? We hear your gracious word to us this morning that you will not hold yourself back.

You have not held yourself back. But you've come down. You've given yourself to us. And God, would you give us eyes to see the privilege that that is.

[3 : 40] You've come down to be with us, to save us, to save this world. And we want to hope in that, Lord. So open our eyes, we pray this morning in the preaching of your word.

And we pray all these things in the name of Jesus. Amen. Well, good morning, everyone. Again, this is the final Sunday of Advent, right? And on this final Sunday of Advent, we are going to be looking at one more passage from the prophetic voice of Isaiah.

And this passage is an interesting one because normally in a prophetic passage, you have God speaking words to people. But here in Isaiah chapter 63 and 64, it's people speaking words to God. And what is raised up into the heavens is a question. And it's a question I imagine that many of us have considered in our lifetimes. Maybe we're considering it this morning as well. The question is, God, where are you?

God, where are you? Where are you, God? Look with me at how our passage begins and ends again. Chapter 63, verse 15. Look down from heaven and see. From your lofty throne, holy and glorious, where are your zeal and your might, your tenderness and compassion, are withheld from us.

[4 : 48] Then look at the end of the passage, chapter 64, verse 12. After all this, Lord, will you hold yourself back? Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure?

They're basically asking, God, where are you? They're like, I know you see me up there on your lofty throne. I know you can see us and all the hard stuff that we're going through. So where are you?

Where is your zeal? Where is your might? Where is your tenderness, your compassion? Where is your presence? Will you at least say something to us, God? Because as it mentions in verse 10 and 11, what's happened in Israel is that the promised land has become a wasteland.

And God's holy dwelling place has become a temple burned up and ruined. And so it's as if they've been abandoned by God. Like, how could all of this happen if God were truly with them?

And so they ask, God, where are you? Now, if you think about it, this is super interesting. This is super interesting that this part of the prophetic scriptures, that this question coming from the lips of mere mortals is also a word that's divinely inspired from God at the same time.

[5 : 55] Like, think about that for a second. Think about how this is the words of people and the words of God at the same time. God himself, this means that God himself actually inspired this question of, God, where are you?

So, it's pretty fascinating, right, to consider that. That these words questioning God, almost even maybe accusing God, they almost sound like, right? Are actually themselves divinely inspired by God.

And I don't mean to get into a whole doctrine of scripture and, you know, the organic inspiration of the word of God and how it's got two, you know, authors, human and divine.

But I bring this up to make the point that God himself, he invites our questions. God himself welcomes our questions. He gets our questions. He feels our questions. He even inspires our questions.

Another example is, think about Psalm 22. The very same God who created the world, who sovereignly orchestrates all of history, he also divinely inspired the question asked in Psalm 22, the question Jesus asked upon the cross when the very Son of God asked his Father what?

[6 : 59] My God, my God, why? Why have you forsaken me? It's a bold question, right? It's a bold question. And yet it was God himself who inspired those words that Jesus took onto his lips in his moment of greatest anguish.

So again, the point is we can ask our bold and honest questions to God. God, why? God, how? God, where are you? And perhaps some of us feel this is too bold, though.

And some of us think this is just too scary. Maybe it even seems impious to ask such a question, to be so vulnerable with God, to share with him our hurts and our hearts, and to ask him these various questions that so vex us.

But if that's you this morning, I hope that you'll see in God's word that God not only welcomes our questions, but sometimes, again, he even inspires them. And I want you to know that this place, Christ Church, isn't just a place that's sacred, where we exalt the divine, but it's a safe place as well. Where we can examine the divine. And we would be honored to walk with you as you engage these questions. Because we believe in a God. We believe in a God who engages our questions.

[8 : 14] Even this question of where are you to this God we're supposed to know is omnipresent, who is everywhere. He wants us to engage him and to ask him, go ahead and ask me, where are you? Now, God's word to us today is that this question, God, where are you?

This question is still worth asking, and it's worth crying out to God today. And what we're going to consider is why we have to ask this question, God, where are you? Why we have to ask this question?

Why we hate to ask this question? And why we hope to ask this question? All right? So first, why do we have to ask this question, God, where are you? Why do we even ask that question? Well, the reason we have to ask the question, God, where are you, is because deep down we know that the presence of God is our deepest need.

That God with us is our deepest need. Like imprinted into the collective memory of humanity are the good old days, right? The good old days when we actually walked with God in the garden. When rather than hiding from his presence, we enjoyed it.

And man, those were the days, right? Those were the days, the days when we didn't have to ask God, where are you? Because he was so perceptibly, so palpably near to us. Right by our side, strolling along with us in the cool of the day.

[9 : 27] No fear, no guilt, no shame, no hiding. Only love, truth, peace, and joy. All until that one day, right? When we rebelled and no longer desired his presence but hid from it.

That fateful day in history when God said to us, where are you? While we hid behind trees, while we hid under fig leaves. And man, it's so ironic, isn't it?

It's so ironic that the very reason we now ask God, where are you, is actually because we first ran from God and prompted him to ask, where are you, to us? We ask God, where are you?

Because we fled from the presence of God. And thus everything has gone to pieces. When we fled from God, we subjected ourselves to a state of no longer seeing him, hearing him, feeling his presence.

We subjected ourselves to his absence. And look at what happens in his absence. Verse 10, the promised land, again, is turned into a wasteland. Zion is turned into a desolate wilderness.

[10 : 25] Verse 11, the temple, the dwelling place of God, has gone up in smoke. So you see, the people of Israel, they had to ask God, where are you? We all have to ask God, where are you?

Because we all see the death and the destruction that's all around us because of our sinful flight from God. We all ask this question because we all know deep down that the only possible remedy for all the death and all the destruction is the very presence of God that we fled from in the first place.

Maybe the very presence of God that some of us are fleeing from even today. But make no mistake, even if we're not sure that we even believe in God, every time, where are you, God, is uttered from the lips of those who are bearing his image.

Even the lips of the atheists who ask this question mockingly. Any time this question is asked, whether mockingly or sincerely, it is evidence that this broken world's ultimate need is God's presence.

Whether asked intentionally or unwittingly, we all ask, where are you, God? Because we know that the presence of God is our only hope, the only hope of the world. The presence of God alone can clean up our mess in this world.

[11 : 41] The presence of God alone. Like, let's be honest. Think about it. What really can save the world other than the presence of God? Think about all the biggest challenges that you personally face.

Can anyone but God really save you? I'll say, as your pastor, sometimes I listen to some of your struggles, and in my head, I'm like, oh man, yeah, that is bad.

It is. It is hard. Right? I know that the deacon's fund is not going to heal that problem. Right? I know that my best sermon, my best pastoral counsel is not going to heal you and solve your problems. You need a miracle. I need a miracle. We all need a miracle to save us. Right? Right? And you know, it's precisely in my attempt to shepherd this flock, to even be a shepherd to myself, that I'm reminded that, man, the Lord has to be our shepherd.

The Lord has to be our shepherd, because then and only then shall we truly not want. Like, he alone can restore our souls. He alone can lead us through the valley of the shadow of death.

[12 : 47] And man, that's just on a personal, individual level, right? But think about all the biggest challenges, like, our whole collective world faces. Like, what will truly bring salvation to our suffering world?

Like, in the fullest sense of the word salvation, incorruptible, imperishable, eternal salvation and shalom. What's it going to take? More diplomacy and politics? Better science and technological advancement?

More therapy and counseling? More hard work and wisdom? More charity and goodwill? No. Nothing from within this cursed creation can cure our cancerous corruption. It's got to be something, it's got to be someone transcendent. Someone incorruptible. Someone coming from the outside in. Because creation will never be able to save itself. Only our creator can. And this is why Isaiah 64 uses such urgent, aggressive, even violent sounding language and imagery, right? Begging for God's presence.

[13 : 48] Begging God to do whatever it takes to come down. Verse 1. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down. Like, break through God.

Tear through the sky if you have to. Burst onto the scene. Make the mountains tremble, it says in verse 1. Set twigs ablaze. Cause water to boil. Cause the nations to quake. Verse 2. Do something unexpectedly amazing, it says in verse 3.

It's basically saying nothing else will possibly do but a literally earth-shattering, unexpected, surprisingly seismic act of God, rending the heavens, bursting through every barrier to come to his people to save them.

Nothing less than an out-of-this-world power. So fiery, so blazing, so surprising that all creation trembles will do. This is the ultimate Advent prayer.

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down. A prayer for the surprising breakthrough of the presence of God. And my question is, is this our Advent prayer? Are we longing for his coming with this kind of desperate urgency, hungry for a real seismic change?

[14 : 59] Something beyond our wildest imaginations? And I've been captured by this verse, verse 3 this week. It really stood out to me. This idea of God doing awesome things that what?

We did not expect. Awesome things that we did not expect. And it got me thinking, are we living lives where we're refusing to be surprised by God?

And might that be a huge problem, actually? An evidence of a lack of faith. I've been reading this Anne Voskamp book, and she really caught me with this quote.

She said, there is no way to discover joy but as surprise. There is no way to discover joy but as surprise. So, like, what if our struggles actually have less to do with the shattering of our circumstances but more to do with our unwillingness to be surprised by God, even in the midst of our shattered circumstances?

Like, I know many of us, I know many of us have had just incredibly major eruptions alter our lives, right? Seismic events shattering our plans, our plans for our children, our plans for our marriages, our plans for our careers, and our finances.

[16 : 16] Maybe your vision for the perfect life that you've been working so hard to pursue has just been broken to pieces recently. But might God be asking you this morning, child, are you willing to be surprised by me?

Are you willing to be surprised by me? Are you willing to be pleasantly surprised? Surprised by joy? Surprised by a God who rends the heavens and comes down for your good?

You know, I think a lot of us say we want salvation. We say we want better days, a better world, but we don't actually long for God's new heavens and new earth.

We just kind of settle for an amended one, right? With no big surprises, just some mild alterations that suit our personal plans. And so then we don't expect much from God.

And we don't care to be surprised by God. We don't care to be surprised by joy because, honestly, most of us hate surprises. If you ask my wife, she'll tell you, Chelsea will tell you, oh man, Andrew hates surprises.

[17 : 20] She tried to surprise me one time. It was briefly before, right before we got married. And she surprised me with, like, honestly, my favorite thing. It was a surprise gathering with all my buddies doing my favorite thing, playing basketball.

And, man, I hated it. I, like, couldn't enjoy myself. I played terribly. And you know why? I hated being surprised because I hated not being in control.

I hated being surprised because I hated not being in control. But now, what if that's the point that God's wanting to surprise us, to show us that it's always better for him to be in control?

So, again, do we truly yearn for a God who will rend the heavens and come down to save us in unexpected and surprising ways? Are we willing to have a God rend whatever he needs to rend in our lives and in our world in order that we might experience the surprising salvation that he wants for us, the surprising salvation we so desperately need?

Do we even believe that we need to be saved? Or do we fear the earthquake that comes with his presence? Do we fear the upheaval and the disruption of our comfy status quo?

[18 : 40] Christ Church, do we truly yearn for a new heavens and a new earth? Or would we rather God leave our current heavens alone? You know, maybe some of us, even though we know we should be asking, God, where are you?

We are quite content to kind of push that question off and not give it too much thought or attention. In fact, for many of us, the answer to this question is quite scary and threatening, right? For many of us, we actually hate to ask the question, God, where are you?

Because the notion of the presence of God presents us with a huge conundrum, right? We hate to ask this question, God, where are you? Because we know that just as much as we need him to rend the heavens and come down with fire to judge all wickedness and save the world, we know that his fiery power and presence actually threaten us as much as anybody else.

Notice in verses 2 to 4, how just as soon as the request is made for God to come down with fire and cause his enemies to quake, just like he'd done for Israel many times before, notice the conundrum that this prayer introduces in verse 5.

There's a realization here, right?

[20 : 01] That yes, we need your presence and yes, we know you come to save the righteous, but what about those of us who aren't righteous? What about those of us who have forgotten to follow your ways?

Oh, shoot. We just ask them to come down and fire against our enemies, but wait a minute. What if we're actually his enemies? Like, yes, we need God to judge and condemn all that is wicked in this world, but what about us and our wickedness?

And yes, we need God to fight our enemies, but what happens when we're our own worst enemies, when we're even enemies of God? How then shall we be saved? It's a scary question to ask, right? It's a scary question to ask. And if it's not scary to you, then I wonder if you've realistically assessed yourself according to the standards of the holy God of the universe, the God who reveals himself in the scriptures, the God who's revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

Do we realize that even our most righteous deeds, it says in verse 6, are but filthy rags before God? It could be translated filthy menstrual rags.

[21 : 12] Like, no matter how hard we try, there will always be blood on our hands, and uncleanness and impurity in our hearts. Blood, uncleanness, and impurity that we cannot cleanse on our own.

Because everything we do, everything we do is tainted by sin. Everything we do, even our most righteous deeds are worthy of condemnation. See, we don't just need to repent of our sinfulness. We need to repent of even our righteousness. Because 99.9% purity isn't good enough before our holy, holy, holy God.

And man, I'm not even at 1%, let alone 99.9%, right? But really, 99.9% isn't even enough to save us from the anger of God against all that is wicked, both outside of the world and inside of us.

And if this seems unreasonable to you, do you realize that if only 99.9% of airplanes landed in SFO every day, there would be nine crash landings every week?

[22 : 16] Do you realize that if only 99.9% of newborns were delivered safely into the hands of their doctors and midwives, there would be 371 babies dropped every day?

See, when we realize that 99.9% purity is not enough, it really drives home the question, right? How then shall we be saved?

How then shall we be saved? And perhaps this is a question that's on your heart. Perhaps this is a question that you're wrestling with today. How then shall I be saved? You feel the weight of your sin.

You feel the guilt. You feel the shame. You're haunted by that long list of things you ought to have done but failed to do, and that equally long list of things you ought not to have done but still did. And you think of the hurt.

And you think of the damage that you've caused both to yourself and to others. The offensiveness that you've raised against God. And you can totally identify with this conundrum here in verse 6.

[23 : 15] All of us have become like one who is unclean. And all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. It's the complete opposite, right? Of the tree planted by streams of water delighting in God's law.

We all shrivel up instead like a leaf, it says. 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 given us over to our sins.

You read this and you're like, this is me. This is me. And you know what you deserve. You deserve, we all deserve the absence of God.

When we consider this question, God, where are you? We know the answer we deserve is his silence. And so we all wonder in one way or another, how then can any of us be saved?

I want to tell you that the beautiful irony of the gospel is that it is precisely those who scratch their heads wondering, how then shall we be saved, who are in the best position to be saved by the God of grace?

[24 : 17] And this is the beautiful dynamic of the Christian faith, that salvation is only possible for those who feel the impossibility of their own salvation. That there is help for the helpless, hope for the hopeless, that blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, because Jesus promises that they will be filled. And this brings me to my last point. Why we hope to ask this question? Like, why do we still dare to ask this question, even though we hate to ask it, even though the presence of God presents us with a huge problem?

How can we ask, God, where are you with hope? Like, hope for better days and not worse days? Well, the answer is right here in verse 8. Yet you, it says.

Not yet I, but yet you. They look back to God. And this is the gospel. That God is even better at saving than we are at sinning.

Like right here in verse 8, this is the gospel. Yet not I, but God. But God, the Lord, Yahweh, the hope that we have of hearing from God and receiving His presence when we ask Him, where are you?

[25 : 28] The hope that we have of this God rending the heavens and coming down, not to destroy us, but to save us. This hope does not lie in us, but solely in Him. And particularly in this God who is both a father and a potter.

How then can we be saved the same way as the prodigal son was saved? By the benevolence and the forgiveness of His loving Father. The hope of the world, Christ Church, is the love of our Father in heaven.

Verse 9. 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. Our great hope is that we have a Father who wants to call us His own, His own children.

Verse 9 here, it reminds me of Psalm 103, right? The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and mercy. He will not always chide, nor will He keep His anger forever.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him. And as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.

[26 : 39] As a father, it says, shows compassion to His children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear Him. There is no other love like the love of our Father in heaven.

A love so strong, right, that He can put a ring on our fingers and forever change our status from estranged to heirs, just like that. A love so strong, He can completely cover our uncleanness and impurity with His robe of righteousness.

And all for free. All completely for free. See, because, get this, if God is our Father, then God's Son is also our brother. And remember, who do you think that ring belonged to?

That ring that the Father put on the prodigal son? And who do you think that robe belonged to? And who do you think that fattened calf belonged to? We've squandered our inheritance. The rest belong to the older brother.

But the good news of this benevolent family of God, Father, Son, and Spirit, is that by God's gracious initiative, we can be co-heirs with Christ by faith.

[27 : 47] Not at our own expense, but at Christ's expense. Co-heirs, Apostle Paul says, co-heirs with glory. Glory, isn't that crazy?

From filthy rags to fancy robes, glorious robes. And this is where God, as the potter, comes and sees it. If God is our potter, then we aren't just children. We aren't just even clay, but we're His artwork.

His masterpiece, to use Apostle Paul's language, where? His poema. His workmanship. And maybe you're here today and you feel like the prodigal son. Like you will never be worthy of your father's love.

Like He could never call you His child again. Never accept you back into His household. Maybe you're here today and you feel like there is nothing good He could make of you and your clay, the clay of your life.

Like you are a cracked and broken pot, bound to be tossed and of no use to any potter. No value to anyone. But the true story of Advent, the story that we celebrate at Advent, is that when God runs the heavens, He makes beautiful things out of what the world despises as ugly and worthless.

[29 : 01] When the Father sent His Son, when the potter became the clay, no one desired Him. But at His baptism, the heavens were torn open and the Spirit descended upon Him.

And God basically said, well, I desire Him. I love Him. And God could not be kept silent about His love for His Son. His love burst through the heavens to declare His love for His child.

And He wants to do that for all His children. And even though the story of His Son and all of our stories might include being broken to pieces like a fragile piece of disposable clay, the Master Potter's unfailing love for His Son, for His children, surprised the world with joy, with the most beautiful masterpiece of all time, the resurrection.

The resurrection of Christ. The resurrection of all God's people. The first fruits of new creation to come when the heavens will be torn again, torn apart once again, that earth might receive her King. So you see, in the person of Jesus Christ, we have the answer to this cliffhanger question at the end of our passage in verse 12. After all this, Lord, will you hold yourself back?

[30 : 14] Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure? In Christ, God's answer is no. No. No. The Lord does not hold Himself back.

Nor does He keep silent and punish us beyond measure. No, He actually burst into the world as the eternal Word of God become flesh, for the heavens themselves could not contain His love for us.

And the proof of this is that when the heavens tore open for Him to come amongst us, He did so. He came amongst us in order to take upon Himself the punishment that we deserved.

As the prophet Isaiah says earlier in chapter 53, the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him. And by His wounds, we are healed.

And this is the gospel. The surprising salvation that we never deserved, but always desired, right? So come. Come this Advent.

[31 : 15] Come this Christmas. Come all you faithful. Come all you unfaithful. Come to the one who's come. And who's coming again. Come. Let us adore Him.

Let's pray. God, we thank You that we don't have to hide the truth about ourselves.

We can acknowledge the depths of our sin before You. And that that is not the end of the story.

That when we are overcome by the greatness of our sin, You always turn that around and show us the greatness of our Savior.

Lord, would that dynamic be so real to us? Sin and salvation. Would we be so thankful that You are a God who runs the heavens, comes down, that You are a God who is better at saving than we are at sinning?

And that's pretty good, God. Thank You, O Lord. Thank You, O God, for this Advent season, for the coming Christ.

[32 : 37] We long for Him, O God, and we invite Him here to save us, to save the world, to make all things new. Make us a people who long for the new heavens and the new earth. Make us a new creation people, a new creation community, a new creation church that bears witness to the only news worth telling, the good news of the gospel, that Jesus Christ is Lord.

In His name we pray. Amen.