

Advent Carol Service AM

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[0 : 00] If you would like to follow along, it may be helpful to turn to Isaiah chapter 64, that's page 623 in the Pew Bible in front of you.

This is going to kick off our Advent sermon series. Advent is a season of preparation for Christmas. Just a reminder, at Christmas we're going to celebrate the birth of Christ in humility in Bethlehem. We're also going to anticipate, look forward to the return of Christ in glory in the new creation. So Advent is a season of waiting that prepares us for receiving.

And the theme of our Advent sermon series this year is the weary world rejoices and the prophet Isaiah is going to be our guide. Why Isaiah? Because Isaiah speaks to a people who have been wearied by the changes and chances of this life.

Isaiah speaks to a people that have been wearied to the point of almost total exhaustion, burnout on the verge of depression and despair.

[1 : 04] Isaiah speaks to a people who are waiting for God to radically intervene in their lives and they know they have no hope without that. They need salvation. They need redemption.

They need rescue from above. And it doesn't take very long for us to read the news headlines of our news feeds in our contemporary day to know just how much we need God's rescue in our world today.

Isaiah 64 comes to us as a communal prayer of God's people who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life crying out for help. I'm the only one who can help.

And so I'm going to suggest that we explore this prayer through three simple questions this morning. What is the prayer? Why do they pray it? And how is the prayer answered by God? So what is the prayer? It starts at the very beginning in verse 1 of chapter 64 of the prophet of Isaiah. This is the heart of it. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down.

[2 : 05] What does it mean to rend something? It means to tear it apart or to tear it open. So think of that famous line in some classical wedding ceremonies. Maybe you've heard it on a movie before.

What God has joined together, let no one rend asunder. Let no one take apart. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down is the prayer.

It means, Lord, would you open up the heavens and enter in to earth? Would you open up and enter in? In other words, Lord, would you open up your heavenly realm to our earthly realm?

And would you invade our earthly realm with your heavenly realm? So the prayer at the very beginning is a prayer for radical divine intervention. A prayer that God would break through into our world, that God would break through into our churches, and that God would break through into our lives.

Interestingly, it's not a prayer for peace and prosperity. It's not a prayer for comfort and consolation. Good things.

[3 : 10] It is a prayer for holy fire. The presence of Almighty God before whom mountains quake and nations tremble. And here we do well to remember Isaiah's vision of God in chapter 6 that kind of kicks off his ministry to the people of Israel.

He gets a vision of the Lord sitting on his throne, six-winged seraphim surrounding him, these angelic, majestic creatures. With two of their wings, they cover their faces.

With two of their wings, they cover their feet. And with two of their wings, they fly. And as they are flying around, the Holy One who sits on the throne, they cry out to one another, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory. And Isaiah, when he catches just a little glimpse of this, the foundations of the temple are shaking, and the temple is being filled with smoke.

And Isaiah is prostrate before the Lord, and he says, Woe am I, I am lost, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down?

[4 : 18] Are you sure, Isaiah? Are you sure, Israel? Are you sure, St. John's Vancouver, that this is what you want to pray? This is not a prayer for peace and prosperity, but for holy fire.

It is praying for something majestic, awesome in the truest sense of that word. Maybe something even frightening, because the people of God are so desperate that they are begging the one before whom seraphim hide their faces to come down to earth.

And when he comes, we are told in verse 2, that the brushwood of our lives will burst into flames, and the tepid water of our souls will break into a rolling boil.

Not comfort, but holy revival is what the people of God are praying for. Because comfort without holiness in the end does not heal. Yes, God spoke words of comfort to his people in Isaiah 40.

Thank the Lord for that. But here in Isaiah 64, God's people cry out for holiness to come down. So why this prayer?

[5 : 32] Why, in the midst of desperation, a prayer for the presence of the Holy One? Why a prayer for drastic intervention? Two reasons that were given. The first is because of who we are.

That's verses 5 to 7. And then the second is because of whose we are. And that's verses 8 to 9. In other words, this prayer is motivated by a two-fold reality, the knowledge of ourselves and the knowledge of God.

So number 1, verse 5 through 7, because of who we are. Have you ever heard that little phrase, that little quip? If you want to find a perfect church, you better not join it.

Sometimes we need a dose of honest self-assessment in our lives. And that's exactly what's happening here. The people of God are getting honest before God. In verse 5, we hear of their persistent sin problem.

Here it is. Behold, you were angry and we sinned. And in our sins, we have been a long time.

They're saying, we haven't just occasionally messed up. We've actually made sin a way of life.

[6 : 40] We've persisted in it. And then verse 6, we're told that this has led to a polluted spirituality. We have all become like one who is unclean. And our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

And the image here is visceral. It's actually the image of menstrual cloths. Even our righteous deeds have flown from impure hearts and are like discharged before God.

And then the second half of verse 6. We all fade like a leaf. Another image. A shriveled leaf. And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

And so it's not just that we have done occasionally bad things. But we are now at the mercy of our iniquities, like a leaf before the wind. They have come to define us and determine the course of our lives.

And then verse 7, maybe the most devastating verse. There is no one who calls upon your name who rouses himself to take hold of you. Prayerlessness is the surest sign of spiritual trouble and disease.

[7 : 43] And then the second half of verse 7. And worst of all, you have hidden your face from us, O Lord, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities. It is this horrible feeling that God has hidden his face, and maybe he has even given his people over to the self-chosen prison.

So the people of God are crying out to God to intervene because of who they are. It's like the first step of an AA process. What's step number one of the 12-step recovery?

It's admit your life has become unmanageable. And recognize that you are powerless to deal with your addiction without help. That's what the people of God are doing.

They have finally realized that they have reached a crisis moment in their lives, and their own hopelessness and helplessness, apart from God's direct action, has become very apparent to them.

Brothers and sisters, this is what Jesus called being poor in spirit. In his sermon on the mount, he said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall inherit the kingdom of God. Why?

[8 : 48] The poor in spirit are those that know they do not have what it takes. They are honest about that before God. So Isaiah 64 is a communal confession that we are not worthy of the grace for which we ask.

Yes, we say, rend the heavens and come down, God, but we are not worthy of the answers to that prayer. Yet the people of God still ask. We still pray.

Why? That shows up in verses 8 and 9. It's because of whose we are. There is something more fundamental about who we are. It's whose we are. Despite our sin, we still belong to God.

And this is one of the hardest truths for Christians to fathom. One of the hardest and sweetest truths for Christians to savor. Despite our sin, we still belong to God.

Verse 8. But now, O Lord, you are our Father. The basic thing that Jesus invites us to remember and pray. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

[9 : 57] And then he goes on with giving us an image of the loving Father creating and crafting us. We are the clay and you are the potter. We are the work of your hands. And then in verse 9, he says, Don't let our sins get in the way of your purposes for us.

Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not our iniquity forever. Behold, please look. We are all your people. It is an acknowledgement that when God answers our prayers for divine intervention, it is not because he is obligated to us.

It is because he has chosen to be our loving Father. He has chosen to be our creator and our redeemer. It is free mercy. We do not deserve it and we cannot demand it.

But, oh, how God delights to give it. By placing who we are and whose we are side by side, the prayer takes us straight to the heart of the gospel.

Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. Where we are faithless, God remains faithful. God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[11 : 08] It says, Tim Keller said, We are more sinful than we ever knew and we are more loved than we could ever imagine. It's who we are and it's whose we are.

And how does God answer this prayer that the heavens would be opened up and that he would come down? Well, he does exactly what the prayer asks for. He runs the heavens and he comes down quite literally.

And we see this in our gospel reading in Mark chapter 1. Did you notice how Jesus' baptism was portrayed in Mark chapter 1? Did you notice that in Mark chapter 1, it talks about the heavens being torn open?

In no other gospel is that particular language used. In every other gospel, it's a milder verb. It's just the heavens were opened. But in Mark's gospel, he uses a stronger verb.

Jesus saw that the heavens were torn open. It's a reference to Isaiah chapter 64. The heavens are torn open and the Spirit of God descends like a dove.

[12 : 11] And a voice speaks from the heavens. You are my beloved Son. With you, I am well pleased. So what is God's answer to the prayers of his people?

It's the Father's beloved Son. The Father's pleasure in his Son. It's the Father's anointing of his Son with the Holy Spirit for ministry to the world.

This is the world's burning bush moment. Holy fire has become a human person. Radiating with the life and pleasure of God.

At its core, the world does not need another something. It needs a certain someone. And the world is longing for a person, just as Isaiah 64 is crying out for a person.

And you and I are waiting for a person this Advent. Advent is a season of waiting for Christ. Waiting for him to rend the heavens and come down.

[13 : 16] And if we're honest with ourselves, we do not like waiting. I mean, if any of you have had kids, you know how they grab the presents under the tree and they shake it and they weigh it.

And they wonder about what could be in it for about three to four weeks. We'd much prefer our hopes and dreams to be fulfilled immediately, wouldn't we? But often how our lives unfold is that we find ourselves having to hold on sometimes to just a thread of hope while we wait.

Sometimes waiting can be counted in months, as when Mary waited for the birth of her son Jesus. Sometimes waiting has to be counted in decades, as Zechariah and Elizabeth waited on God's answer to their prayers for a son, for an heir.

And sometimes our waiting has to be measured in centuries, as with Israel, the Jewish people, waiting for God to break his silence and send the Messiah. Prolonged waiting, like prolonged praying, can feel like a waste, but it's not.

God does not waste our waiting or our praying to him. Because God uses the waiting to prepare us for the receiving. It's like Simeon and Anna in the Gospel of Luke.

[14 : 33] Our true peace will come only when our eyes have finally seen the salvation that God has prepared in the presence of all people. Christ the Lord. It's as Isaiah says in chapter 64, verse 4.

From of old no one has heard and no ear has perceived and no eye has seen a God like you, who acts for those who wait for him.

My brothers and sisters, may God anoint your waiting this Advent. And may you discover in your waiting all the riches of the glory of Jesus Christ.
Pray this in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.