

MIGHTY ADVENT

Isaiah 64:1-9

First Sunday in Advent (Series B)

December 3, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Old Testament lesson comes from *The Prophet Isaiah*, chapter 64, verses 1 through 9. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Isaiah 64, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

- ¹ Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at your presence—
- ² as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
and that the nations might tremble at your presence!
- ³ When you did awesome things that we did not look for,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
- ⁴ From of old no one has heard
or perceived by the ear,
no eye has seen a God besides you,
who acts for those who wait for him.
- ⁵ You meet him who joyfully works righteousness,
those who remember you in your ways.
Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?
- ⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
- ⁷ There is no one who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.
- ⁸ But now, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
- ⁹ Be not so terribly angry, O LORD,
and remember not iniquity forever.
Behold, please look, we are all your people.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Dahlia,

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Your Jesus came down for you. Despite his great power and majesty, he left heaven and came down as a child no larger than you. He lived a perfect life for you. He took your sins, and he died to remove them from you. He rose from the dead on the third day, so that you too will be raised from the dead to be as perfect as he is.

Now Jesus has come to you in Baptism. He has joined himself to you and you to him. You have died with him. His crucifixion is your crucifixion, so your sin is taken away. He is with you always, and he has given you his Holy Spirit, so that, as you grow up, you will grow in him and live as a child of his Father. And if you have been crucified with him, you will also be raised like him when he returns on the Last Day. All of this is yours, because your Baptism has joined you to Jesus' death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). Jesus came for you.

Isaiah prayed for the LORD to come. "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down" (64:1). This is a surprising prayer, because Isaiah knows full-well who God is. He knows that the LORD is powerful, just, and holy. And he still prays for him to come. He prays, "That the mountains might quake at your presence" (64:2). This is a rare thing.

People might ask to see God. They ask for him to come. But, when he does, they sometimes wish he hadn't. We just don't realize how god-like God is.

In Exodus, Moses asked to see the LORD. But God knew it would be too much for him, so he allowed him to see his back, but not his face (Ex. 33:23).

Or I think of Peter when he began to realize that Jesus really is God in human flesh. They were in Peter's fishing boat, and Jesus gave him a miraculously large catch of fish. Peter was overcome by the powerful presence of God, so he begged Jesus to go away. He couldn't handle being in the presence of someone so terrifyingly powerful. He said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8).

But here, Isaiah prays for the LORD to come down in power. He wants the heavens to be split open, the mountains to quake, and all the nations to tremble at his presence. And Isaiah's not naïve to his own sin or the sin of the people. He says, "Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?" (64:5). He still prays for the LORD to come in power.

Isaiah had also seen the glory of the LORD, perhaps more than anyone else, even more than Moses. In chapter 6, when God called him to be a prophet, Isaiah saw a vision of the LORD on his throne in heaven. It was a terrifying experience. Isaiah reacted the way most people would. He said, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (6:5). But God took his sin away. At his calling, Isaiah experienced that the power and glory of the LORD is not a danger to those who trust in him. But God uses his power to save, and he is actually powerful to remove our sin. Isaiah knew that God's righteous power is a huge threat to sin, but not to those sinners who trust in him. So Isaiah prays that God would use his mighty power to save his people from their sins.

Isaiah has a complete understanding of sin. Too often, we have a narrow view of sin. We think of it only as the bad things that we do, but it's more than that. There is both an active and a passive side of sin. I'll explain what I mean. The active side of sin is the evil stuff we do. It's when we learn the Ten Commandments, along with their full meanings, but we still disobey them. We fear, love, or trust in something besides the one true God. We don't call upon his Name in every time of need. We don't take rest in his Word. We dishonor our parents or other

authorities. We harm or hate our fellow man. We lust after someone or commit some other kind of sexual immorality. We steal, slack off at work, or gain something in a dishonest way. We lie, gossip, or slander our neighbor. Or we covet something or someone that God has not given to us. The active side of sin is that we think, say, and do things that are evil. We also neglect to do the good things God has commanded of us. And if you are anything like me, that's how you usually think of sin. But that's only one side of it.

There is also a passive side of sin. That is, sin is something that happens to us. And I do not mean the sins that other people commit against us. I mean that sin—our nature of being sinful—is something that happens to us. We did not choose to be sinful. It happened to us. We were born this way. You and I did not do anything to become sinful, and we cannot do anything to stop being sinful. Sin is a powerful and oppressive force on us.

So there is an active side of sin and a passive side of sin. In theology we call this “actual sin” and “original sin.” Original sin comes first. It is inherited from our first parents, Adam and Eve, and it leads us to commit actual sins.

The point of this distinction is not to get us off the hook. Our sinful nature wants to take the doctrine of original sin and say, “See, it's not my fault.” We're tempted to appeal to this doctrine to make us *less* guilty. But that's not what it does. The doctrine of original sin makes us *more* guilty. It reveals that we are worse than we thought.

If we think of sin only in terms of our actual sins, or even mostly in that way, we are being blinded by pride. If we think that our problem is merely the bad stuff we do, then we should be able to fix the problem by just being better. But that overestimates our moral strength, and it's prideful.

One of the negative effects of this incomplete view of sin is that it causes us to hide from God. If I am capable of turning this heart around, then I'm going to want to hide from God until I get it cleaned up. Someday in the future, when I've gotten my sin more under control, that would be a better time for God to visit. We hide from God, because, in our pride, we think that we can improve.

But when we consider and accept the reality of original sin, and that we are passive recipients of sin, then we know that we can't clean ourselves up. There won't be some better time in the future for God to come and visit us.

At this point we realize that we are oppressed by sin, and we are powerless to free ourselves. We don't need a God who approves of us if we clean ourselves up, because that will never happen. Instead, we need a God to save us from that sin. Instead of his power being a threat to us, his power is our only chance at salvation.

It's the difference in perspective between oppressors and the oppressed. Now in regards to sin, we are both oppressors and the oppressed. You can call that “intersectionality” if you want. According to actual sin, we are oppressors. That is, we think, say, and do evil. We harm other people. But according to original sin, we are all oppressed by sin. And original sin comes first. We are oppressed by sin before we become the oppressors.

And the oppressors and the oppressed have different perspectives on power. When oppressors run into a righteous power, they see it as a threat. But when the oppressed see that same righteous power, they see it as their salvation. The righteous power of God comes to break oppression. Jesus comes to break the oppression of sin.

This is the way Isaiah understands sin in this passage.

He acknowledges his own sin and the sin of the people. He says,

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“Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities” (64:5b-7).

Isaiah clearly understands how bad we are. “Our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” Even the things that we look at and think are pretty good, when compared to God’s holy righteousness, are filthy. You might think God is overly harsh to see our good deeds that way, but God is the only one who sees things how they really are. And that is how he describes it.

So Isaiah clearly understands how sinful we are. But he does not hide from God. He does the opposite. He begs God to come. Because Isaiah also clearly sees that we are oppressed by sin. He says, “Our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”

We’re caught. We’re oppressed. We have as much power against sin as a leaf has against the wind. We don’t just need God to save us in spite of our sin, we need him to save us from our sin.

Isaiah acknowledges his own sin and the sin of his people, and he prays that God would come down in power to free them from it.

We all must acknowledge that we are oppressed by sin. And this isn’t about excusing ourselves for our actual sins. We have no excuse. It’s about acknowledging that we are powerless against this great force, and we need a strong and righteous God to deliver us.

So God comes.

This is what the season of Advent is all about. Advent is a fancy Latin word that means “coming.” Our God comes to us, and he comes to save.

There are three aspects to Advent. The easy way to remember them is as past, present, and future. Jesus came to save. He still comes to save. And he will come again to save.

The first advent was when Jesus came in the flesh of a fetus. The mighty and eternal Son of God assumed human flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary. He appeared weak. He was tiny. He was born in poverty. But all the power of God was veiled in his flesh. And he used that power to obediently suffer everything that humans suffer, including death. It looked like weakness in our eyes, especially when he suffered death on a cross as a condemned and despised criminal. It looked like weakness, but in reality it was God’s greatest exercise of power, because, in Jesus’ death, he swallowed up sin and death. He broke the oppression that sin has on us. As proof of this, he was raised from the dead. Death, which is the consequence of sin, could not hold Jesus in death. He rose triumphantly. That was the first advent.

We also look to the future when Jesus will come again in glorious majesty. This is when “the nations will tremble at [his] presence.” We who have trusted in him and waited for him will appear with him in glory. Our faith and our suffering will all be vindicated. If we die before that day, our bodies will be raised from the dead. And whether we remain alive or are raised on that day, our bodies and souls will be transformed into the perfect image of God, which was corrupted by the fall into sin, but perfectly restored in Jesus Christ. We will enter into God’s new

creation. And we will live in perfect righteousness and bliss for all eternity. That is Jesus' future advent. We wait for it and pray for it to come.

While we wait for it, Jesus comes to us now through his Word and Sacraments. He comes in mercy, so that we will be prepared to stand with him when he comes in glory. Jesus is the "Word made flesh" (John 1:14). As we hear his Word now, we receive him. He is present to forgive our sins.

And he comes to us in Baptism. We take Scripture literally when it says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3). This is no mere symbol, but you have actually been joined to Christ in his death.

And Jesus comes to us in the Lord's Supper. We take him literally when he says, "**This is my body. ... This is my blood**" (Matt. 26:26, 28; Mark 14:22, 24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:24-25). And we believe Paul when he says, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27). It cannot be a mere symbol, because to misuse it is to actually misuse the body and blood of Jesus.

Many of our Christian brothers see the Lord's Supper as a mere symbol. They say that it cannot be the true body and blood of Jesus, because Jesus ascended into heaven and is at the right hand of the Father. They say he can't be there and here at the same time. That is wrong thinking. Jesus has a human nature, but the human nature does not limit his divine nature. Instead, the divine nature empowers the human nature. He is capable of doing, as both God and man, everything that God is capable of doing. If God is omnipresent, then so is Jesus. So we believe him when he says, "**Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age**" (Matt. 28:20).

Of course, Jesus is capable of being present in the Lord's Supper, and not just spiritually, but physically with his body and blood. But remember, it's not just because Jesus can be present that we believe he is. God can do many things that he does not promise. He does not promise to be present if we use cranberry juice and oatmeal. But he promises to be present in the forms of bread and wine. And, by the way, when I say that, I am putting grape juice into the category of wine. Jesus took bread, and he said, "**This is my body.**" He took a cup of wine and said, "**This is my blood.**" And he commanded us to continue this sacrament (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24-25). The Word of God is powerful to do what it says. But it is not powerful to do things it does not say. So we do not look for him in whatever things we invent. But we cling to what the Word of God commands and promises.

Jesus comes to you in the Lord's Supper. If we truly grasp the magnitude of this, we might be frightened to come and meet him here. And we should fear. This is the God at whose presence the mountains quake and the nations tremble. Sinners tremble in his presence, because he is the destroyer of sin.

There are different kinds of fear. There is the kind of fear that hides from God and never wants him to come. And there is Isaiah's kind of fear, which sees things how they really are, so he begs for the fearsome God to come and save us.

If our sin were something that we could clean up, then maybe we should do that before coming to the Lord's Supper. Maybe then God would be less fearsome. But sin is an oppressor that we cannot free ourselves from. The power of God to destroy sin is our only hope. So fear, and come, because the only thing you have to lose is sin. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.