

Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 11:1-10

1st Sunday in Advent

November 29, 2020 - Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

Adapted from Concordia Pulpit Resources

INI

It's easy to pray in the middle of a storm. It seems as we get older, we'll often forget to have prayer be our first instinct. Instead we'll try to figure things out ourselves first. But when things are serious, we'll pray. Little children can serve as a model for us at times like these. Maybe it's because they haven't learned independence yet. So, often they will instinctively fold their hands and the simple words will pour out of them. "Dear God, please save us."

Growing up in the Midwest, the tornado sirens would go off, and, as a kid, the first instinct was to run to the window to see the powerful storm, to catch a glimpse with my own eyes of the power I had only seen in pictures or movies. But there were other times, when you could almost feel the danger in the air. When even mom was scared and started prepping things to take to the basement, you knew you should take it seriously too. And then we would pray.

Of course, there are other types of storms too—various types of chaos and uncertainty. An illness, a financial crisis in the nation or in the family, a global pandemic, persecution of Christians in more subtle ways at home and in more extreme ways afar. And we pray, "Save us, Lord. Rend the heavens and come down!"

We know these types of prayers—some of them more verbose, some of them simpler and unspoken. We'll pray for God's power—to heal, to protect, to save—for us. And we'll pray for God's power to rain down terror upon our enemies and opponents. Maybe not in so many words uttered aloud, but in the prayers rising from our hearts. Good things for us, judgments for them. We take comfort and have a bit of satisfaction when we are protected and others are brought to their knees. There's even a word for it. Schadenfreude. Taking pleasure in another person's pain. But that can only happen if we aren't experiencing it too.

But what if the storm isn't outside of us? What if the storm is inside? Struggles against our own sinful desires, our own uncleanness, our own disdain for others, our own polluted garments. **"We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."** And what if God is the one who is bringing the storm? What if the storm of God's Word is convicting us, bringing us to our knees? What do we pray then? **"Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down?"** Do we really want that? Do we want that kind of judgment. Because when the prophet Isaiah prays that, it's not simply against the enemies. He's praying that the storm of God would come down upon all of us, enemies and allies alike. Because Isaiah sees corruption of all. **"There is no one who calls upon your name."** In the absence of God's mighty, visible acts, we all become complacent. We all stray. We all, like the leaf, are carried away.

Whether you were aware of it or not, we prayed a prayer almost identical to Isaiah's prayer just a few moments ago. We were much more polite in our praying of it. But it was just as powerful. We prayed it in that great prayer that we pray every year at the beginning of Advent, the prayer that expresses the need for Advent in a nutshell. "Stir up your power O Lord and come..."

But the answer to that prayer rarely comes in expected ways. God instead acts in ways that were unexpected **"[doing] awesome things that we did not look for."** Which brings me to something that I always find a bit curious, and yet when you think about it, it kind of makes sense. We enter the season of Advent expecting talk of birth prophecies and angels and shepherds and a manger. And instead we find Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem, just a week away from His death. Holy Week in Advent I. It always seems like things are slightly out of order.

And that's how we always find God acting, in ways no one expected, in awesome things that no one looked for. God revealed in a man called Jesus, born in a little town called Bethlehem, raised in an even littler town called Nazareth. Doing things backwards.

If nothing else, the Gospel of Mark, from which we're going to hear a whole lot over the coming church year, is a roller-coaster ride of how this God of Isaiah reverses our expectations of who God is and what God should be doing in this person named Jesus. When we think we should find Him riding in with military might, we instead find Him riding lowly, on a beast of burden, toward His captivity. Just as when we think Jesus should come to us with the pomp and circumstance of a king, we will find Him lowly, lying in an animal food trough. And just when we think we've got the whole Christ the King thing nailed down, we find that we have nailed Him to a cross like a common criminal. Except that He hangs there for sins that were not His own, for crimes that He did not commit.

But there we find that His answer to our prayer and to Isaiah's is not that He would rend the heavens and come down but that He would come down to rend the heavens open wide to us, not with mighty acts of power, but with mighty acts of weakness and obedience and service, so that the barrier between heaven and earth could be broken. And the earth would quake and Satan himself would shake in his (whatever Satan wears for footwear).

And we find that our unexpected, yet long awaited Savior has come. And our prayers have been answered, not in ways that we wanted, or would have guessed, or would have chosen. But that unexpected activity of God also means that we don't get what we deserve. And when we finally get the point, we can see God as He truly is—a merciful Lord whose ways and thoughts are higher than ours, whose ways and thoughts are for us. And the people's prayer as He rode into town becomes our prayer. "Hosanna" Save us now. But we pray it knowing it has been fulfilled.

And Isaiah's prayer becomes our prayer. **"Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down."** But we pray it knowing that He already has come. He has come in ways unexpected. Humble. Lowly. Dying on a cross. Doing awesome things that we did not and would not have looked for. And we know that He already has come...out of the tomb, rising from the grave, certifying that His work on the cross did what it was meant to do, freeing us from sin, freeing us from condemnation, freeing us from the curse of death.

In a few weeks we will celebrate this Advent as we celebrate the birth of our Lord. The manger in Bethlehem does not just contain a cute little baby boy, it contains God in our flesh. This is God's Advent, not to judge, but to save. It is God taking on our mortality so that He can take on our sin. God became a baby in a manger so that He could live a life of perfect righteousness and then transfer that righteousness to us as He suffered the judgment that we deserved.

Christ has come. Christ has died. Christ is risen. And Christ will come again. Until that day, as we navigate the literal and metaphorical storms of our lives, in Hope we anticipate His second Advent. And we pray, not in terror, but as His own children, "Come, Lord Jesus" knowing that on that day, at the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, He will not hide His face from us, nor will He remember our iniquity, but we will be His people forever. Amen.