



"Kindling Hope" – Isaiah 64:1-9

First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2023

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I am going to ask you to do a difficult thing today and separate yourself from the holiday culture. Instead, let's enter together into the most neglected and least understood season of the church year – Advent.

The word comes from the Latin meaning "coming," or "approach." The themes of Advent therefore are hope, expectation, waiting, watching, keeping awake.

Before you say, "Oh, I know what's coming," take a look at the color of our paraments. Blue. In the church, blue is synonymous with purple. In fact, in some traditions the color of Advent is purple, just as Lent is purple. And what does purple, or blue mean to the church? Penitence. Confession. Confessing your sins out loud, together, as the first step of the work of healing and relational repair.

Wait a minute. What are you talking about? This doesn't sound like Christmas.

That's right – it's not.

Since the 12th century, Christians have spoken of three comings of Christ: In the flesh in Bethlehem, in our hearts daily, and in glory at the end of time. Advent calls us to anticipate the third of these – the completion of the work of redemption. This is why we must not give in to the temptation, yet, to sing about baby Jesus, because it confuses our focus.

I can tell you're not convinced. Why do we need Advent? Why can't we just sing Christmas carols for the next four weeks?

Because Advent offers us something that no other season does: The invitation to beam ourselves up out of our busy, busy minute-by-minute lives into a state of awareness where we can begin to grasp the entire span of creation history, not as a series of events but as the expression of God's hope for his creation. Putting ourselves there involves a radical reorientation of ourselves in time, in which there is no sense of passing time but simply of God's continuous movement toward creation. Movement driven by love.

Advent brings us into this greatest of mysteries more compellingly than the wonder of Jesus' birth, his incomprehensible death on Good Friday, or even the mind-bending reality of his resurrection on Easter.

Here on the first Sunday in Advent we are called to witness the great continuum of creation from its beginning in Genesis 1 to the end of all things, the return of Christ that we regularly proclaim in our liturgy. Today we are placing ourselves at this cosmic threshold, where our voices join with those at the very end of the Bible. In Revelation 22:20 we hear, "The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' And we cry out in scripture's final verse: "Maranatha! Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!"

And what is our attitude? Celebration? No. Remember, this is Advent. We are in confession. As we see in Isaiah today, the cry comes not with joy and excitement but with the anguish of all that we have endured and our urgent longing for God to break into our darkness.

That is why we find ourselves today voicing Isaiah's great lament at the beginning of our first reading:

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence!"

The prophet continues, "In the past you did great deeds. You came down. All were aware of your power and majesty. But now we do not see you! You have gone away – were you angry at us because we sinned? Well, now that you've gone, we have all transgressed. We have utterly fallen away. You deserted us, and now see what a mess we have made of things!" And in verse 12, just beyond today's reading: "After all this, will you keep silent and punish us so severely?"

Out of this anguish erupts his impassioned plea for God to tear open the heavens and come down – "tear open" here literally meaning to rip apart or to rend, like the rending of a garment.

Here in this verb we find an astonishing clue about God's own personality. In ancient cultures the rending of a garment was a sign of extreme grief or lament. Here the prophet prays that God would engage in this same very human behavior, but with God's own garment – the heavens.

We know from Psalm 104 that one way to imagine heaven was as God's garment – "Bless the Lord, O my soul...you are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as a garment." God is wrapped in the heavens. It is this garment that Isaiah is begging God to rip open so that he may come down.

The surprise is that Isaiah is not only voicing the people's lament but calling on God to lament as well. To cross the space between heaven and earth. To rip apart the cosmic barrier and descend to be with God's suffering people. To bridge the chasm of silence and hurt. We feel abandoned. We are going our own ways, we stubborn and willful goats. Isaiah is pleading for God to come to be with us so that healing can come and the relationship between God and God's people can be restored.

In today's Gospel, Mark's audience surely connected Jesus' words to the shocking destruction of their temple, that massive structure built to house God. Now, where was God? How were they to worship? Everything that had defined them, that gave their lives meaning, was gone. It was a moment for them in which time stood still. It was a place they were called into that involved the same radical reorientation that Advent offers us.

This is where waiting, watching, and hopefulness come in. On this first Sunday of Advent we are breathlessly waiting to see what God will do next. How *will* God tear open the heavens and come down? How will God respond? How will God bridge this chasm that we have created through our own sinfulness and waywardness? What IS God's next move going to be?

This is deep blue mystery of Advent. If in your inner life you can push away Christmas and live in the midst of this mystery until the evening of December 24, you may find your hope being kindled not as a series of sparks but as a burning flame. Then you can receive the wonder of God's answer as never before.

Amen.