

Open the Heavens and Come Down

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Isaiah 64:1-9

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

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Today is the 1st Sunday of Advent, the season in the year when we fall to our knees, aware that in spite of our deepest efforts, the world is in a mess, so that we have a deep awareness that, by ourselves, we are not doing a good job of setting the world right. *That* is why we pray, “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus.” We need the Lord to come and bring things more fully towards the kingdom. And what we may observe is that this posture of prayer-for-the-Lord’s-intervention, while it is a comfort in the deepest sense, it also has something to unsettle and offend just about everyone.

Those who are in power, who are fond of the status quo, may be offended by the Advent notion that things need to be set right, that things should not just be kept as they are. The powerful ones may well be keeping their fingers crossed that this talk of “Advent” - a word that means “coming” - is just pretty religious talk about something that happened a long time ago, but that doesn’t have anything to do with our lives and our world now.

On the other hand, those who are fighting for power may be offended by the idea that on our own, we can’t fix things; they may even think that it is an abdication of responsibility to pray for the Lord’s intervention. “Just leave it to us,” they may say, “We know how to fix it.” That, as well as the haunting possibility that when the Lord comes, the intervention may be something other than what we are looking for. Jesus’ first coming was not exactly what the first disciples were hoping for, so it may be like that with the second coming as well. After all, the Lord’s ways are not our ways, and the Lord’s thoughts are not our thoughts.

This is why it is good for the first Sunday of Advent to follow last week’s Christ the King Sunday, when we talked of the way that the king who will come is none other than Christ the King, which means that we have a sense of the kind of kingdom he will bring. It will be a kingdom of grace and truth, a kingdom of justice and love, a kingdom where tax collectors and sinners, lepers and Roman centurions, are all part of the party.

That is why the season of Advent is a fundamentally *a season of hope*. During Advent, we are preparing ourselves for the birth of God’s Messiah, the coming of the Savior, the invasion of our time by eternity, the assault on every oppressive regime by the divine mercy. We are preparing ourselves for the Christ child, who comes to set us free.

“Good news of great joy for all the people.”

“The desert shall rejoice and blossom, the wilderness and dry land will be glad.”

“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.”

“His name shall be Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

This is the season of promise, when we live by every word that comes from the mouth of God. God promises that we will not be left alone, God promises that that our sins will be redeemed, God promises that everyone who believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life.

Advent is the season of expectation, when hope for redemption and salvation and rescue and liberation burns in our chests; it is the season when we are invited to lift up our heads, and to keep ourselves alert, for God’s redemption is on the way. Hope is a core characteristic of the season of Advent, and no matter how much the spirit of cynicism may be at work in our society, in the church, and in our own hearts, the bright fire of God’s hope cannot be snuffed out. That is the first, and I would say the primary, direction in which Advent draws our attention.

But Advent hope has a particular *texture and quality*, and we must pay attention to these. For there is a hollow version of hope, and it usually shows its face during this time of year. This distorted version of hope is found in the empty promises that if we just close our eyes to the news, stick our heads in the sand and plug our ears, we can wish all of our problems away. This distorted hope is found in the shallow whistling of television and advertising, that we can just spend some more money and make ourselves feel better.

But that is not the hope of the church, and it is not the hope of Advent. Advent, as much as any other time of the year, is strong and solid in facing the troubles of our days. Advent, as much as any other season of the year, is a time when we become more deeply aware of how much we need God, how deep the conflicts and disagreement between us are, how much hurt and loss we are walking around with, how much injustice there is in our society.

Advent hope faces all of these, because Advent hope knows that these troubles, however challenging they are for us, in the end, they are not what will define us. Advent hope does what Isaiah 64 does. It prays for God to come anew into our lives as they are and redeem us. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” These vigorous words call on God to be immediately present with us. Isaiah 64 understands that *God’s presence* does not mean that everything will necessarily be calm. “The mountains quake at your presence, the nations tremble at your presence.” Advent hope is not unduly troubled when there is agitation in our world, because we know that God is greater than any agitation we may face (a word that those of us who get rattled by conflict may need to hear).

Brothers and sisters, Advent hope – the hope that is available to you and to me - is a deeply grounded, profoundly realistic, and yet astonishingly confident, hope. Advent hope does not take us out of reality, but equips us to face reality with our heads held high, to live our lives with grace and nerve and faith.

Because you and I are not alone. We are never alone. You are not alone right now, no matter what you're facing. The promise of Advent is that God in Jesus Christ will give you everything that you need to face your trouble. God in Jesus Christ will supply you with everything you need. The Lord is your shepherd, you shall never want.

So as you move forth from worship today, carry with you this fierce thing that we call Advent hope. Watch for moments of God's redemptive activity in your life and in the world. Keep awake and alert for signs of God's presence around you. And invite God to enlarge your heart during this season. In the name of the triune God, to whom be all glory, honor, and power. Amen.