

Scripture Reading for 29th Nov 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9 (NIV)

64 Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!

² As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down *to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations* to quake before you!

³ For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

⁵ You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?

⁶ All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

⁷ No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins.

⁸ Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.

⁹ Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.

Mark 1 :9-11

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw *heaven being torn open* and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

1 Corinthians 2:7-10

⁷ [No,] we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ However, as it is written: “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”¹— the things God has prepared for those who love him—¹⁰ these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.

¹ Paul adapts Isa 64:4.

Sermon: From “Why?” to Waiting in Hope

Are there times that *you* have wanted to *shout* at God? What did you want say? “God, *where* are you?” “*Why, don’t you do something?*” Or “This is *SO unfair?*” Welcome to the club! I have said that, we have *all* said that at some time, for we are human. For many, this pandemic has thrown up those same questions. And we ask, “God, *when* will you act?” Perhaps even, “God, are you *able* to act?”² Or “Are we on our own, after all, just trying to muddle through life, one crisis after another?” For people of faith, the answer to the last question is: “No, we are *not* alone.” But that still doesn’t help us with our experience of the mysterious silence of God. We still have our many questions we would like answering. At such times, one thing we can do is to take comfort from our collective faith tradition. As we wait in hope for the coming of Jesus, Advent reminds us to *look back* at the context of that first Christmas. At that time, the Jews also thought God had been silent for far too long. Their last prophet lived over 200 hundred years earlier, well outside of living memory. Under Roman oppression, they were also asking “God, *where* are you?” and “*Why don’t you do something?*” This wasn’t their first time for such questions either. Even the Jewish *prophets* asked the same questions centuries earlier, as we heard in our reading from Isaiah.

That longing for God to act was also echoed in the words of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” That Advent hymn is a haunting lament that begins with a messianic plea to release or to “ransom” captive Israel, mourning, as they were, in lonely exile in Babylon. Isaiah’s words³ are a part a Jewish communal lament from that devastating exile period and it’s a fitting way for us to begin Advent. We can’t rush to the joy of Christmas morning without first realizing the long, dark night of the soul; the experience of the silence of God, the *waiting* that precedes the “coming” that is an integral part of Advent.⁴

Let’s recall that Isaiah’s community stood on the brink of losing its spiritual identity. The temple was in ruins, Jerusalem has been burned and decimated, the elite Jews were living in captivity far from home.⁵ Their faith in God has been shaken to the core because everything they have relied upon has collapsed. What do they do? They appeal for God’s help in a crisis through the words of a *lament*. They are *brutally* honest with God, as we will see. In fact, they *shout* at God!⁶ And God *doesn’t* retaliate! The people understand that their God is “big” enough to handle the anger and frustration they need to get off their chests. That’s because their underlying assumption is of God’s *steadfastness* because they know, deep-down, that God will keep the covenant he has made with them; he will ultimately keep his promises.

² This is considered in Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018).

³ Isa 63:7-64-12 is the complete passage. It was composed sometime after the Babylonian conquest of 586 BC and prior to the rebuilding of the Temple in 515 BC. (This is usually classed as 3rd Isaiah, certainly *not* the “Isaiah” of Isa 1-39.)

⁴ We can’t make sense of the Gospel story without recognizing its continuity with the Old Testament; Advent helps us here.

⁵ Isa 63:18; 64:10-11. Jewish farmers (and other lower-class workers) would be maintaining the homeland for their Babylonian overlords.

⁶ We are not used to such strong rhetoric because we consider ourselves to be “New Testament people”!

In chapter 63, verse 7, the lament begins with Isaiah remembering God's earlier gracious acts towards Israel. God *himself* was their deliverer, and he suffered alongside them.⁷ In his love and mercy, God rescued his people, lifting them up and carrying them throughout their past history.⁸ Isaiah admits that the people have rebelled against God and grieved his spirit. Nevertheless, from *their* perspective, God is now actively working *against* them, as if he were *their* enemy!⁹ Isaiah shouts: "Where are you God? Where is the God who did all those mighty deeds in the time of Moses?"¹⁰ Having remembered God's presence with them in the past, his absence now seems all the more stunning. Jews asked the same question after the Holocaust; we can ask the same question in the middle of this pandemic. Isaiah goes on, "At least *look down* from heaven and take notice of us. Where is your enthusiasm for us, your people, and where is your mighty power? Don't hold back your tender compassion!"¹¹ This second "Where?"-question is really a challenge concerning God's nature or character. It asks in effect, are the cynics right in their claims that God is not capable to save us, or too distant to hear our prayers. They seriously wonder if God no longer cares for them.

On hearing this, we may think such language is disrespectful and some might imagine God sending a few lightning bolts in reply! I actually think this ranting is encouraging; let me explain why. While there seems to be a lot of shouting going on and the language *is* forthright, it's *communication* that arises out of a *relationship*. That bond is strained at this point in time and, as we will see in a moment, very close to breaking point; yet the connection still exists. What we're also witnessing here is the prophet's role as *mediator*, stuck as he is between two sides of this endangered *partnership*. Isaiah is appealing to God on behalf of the people and to the people on behalf of God. Like Moses, Isaiah is committed to both God's honor and to the people's well-being; he *pleads* with God, yet accepts solidarity with the people in an attempt to prompt *both* sides to break the apparent impasse. Let's hear what Isaiah says next:

Isaiah reminds God that he has a *relationship* with them, he says: "LORD, you are our *Father*; you have a *reputation* of being our rescuer from old."¹² This is noteworthy because the notion of God as *Father* was rare for this time period. Just when you think Isaiah may be softening his tone, he then says, "Why, God, did *you* make *us* wander from your ways? Why did *you* make *us* cold and stubborn so that we no longer worshiped you?"¹³ First, notice we have gone from the "Where?" question to the "Why?" question! Second, Isaiah is now claiming its *God's fault* that the people have become stubborn and have turned their backs on God! He then *pleads* with God, "Turn back for the sake of your servants."¹⁴ Isaiah then exclaims, "O that you would *tear open* the heavens and come down."¹⁵ It's *not* enough for God to

⁷ Isa 63:9a (NET).

⁸ Isa 63:9b.

⁹ Isa 63:10.

¹⁰ Isa 63:11-13.

¹¹ Isa 63:15.

¹² Isa 63:16.

¹³ Isa 63:17. Such a blame claim is not meant to excuse the community before God, but rather to motivate God to act in redemption – in saving his people.

¹⁴ Isa 63:17b. v19 in *The Message* has: "For a long time now, you've paid no attention to us. It's like you never knew us."

¹⁵ Isa 64:1. It is thought Mark alludes to this in 1:10.

merely *look down* from the vantage point of heaven,¹⁶ Isaiah wants him to *come down* and *do* something! He goes on to say, “Do the kinds of dramatic, unexpected things that you did in the past, and shock *the whole world*. For you are always full of surprises!”¹⁷

After that outburst, the tone of this lament begins to change as the prophet leads his community into a confession of sin,¹⁸ in other words, an act of repentance or a U-turn back towards God. He says, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and even our so-called “righteous” deeds are like filthy rags. We all shrivel up like a leaf and like the wind, our sins sweep us away. No one prays to you or makes the effort to reach out to you, because you’ve turned away from us and left us to stew in our sins.”¹⁹ Note the language is still frank and transparently honest with God. And whatever we may think of their theology today, that was their perspective then. Thankfully, we don’t have to have a perfect understanding of God or his ways; he always responds to a humble and contrite heart.

Isaiah concludes, “Even so, God you are *our Father*, we are the clay and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”²⁰ That potter and clay image was a popular in the Old Testament, going right back to the creation of Adam.²¹ He ends: “LORD, do not be too angry! Don’t always hold our sins against us. Take a good look at your people, at all of us. Jerusalem is a desolate ruin; the temple has been destroyed by fire. In light of all this, how can you hold back? How can you be silent?”²²

Such provocative and evocative words; what are we to make of them today?

First, let me say that these words are far from sentimental, yet they *are* heartfelt. The people are coming to terms with God *as he is*, *not* as they want him to be. Too often we can fail to grasp that God is *not* a nice old man with a beard, a Santa Claus living on a cloud. We *can’t* control or contain God.

Second, God’s apparent silence and inactivity tells us something about God’s ways of relating to the world. It also makes us think about our *relationship* with God, perhaps giving space to deconstruct a distorted set of beliefs and practices, and provide an opportunity to awaken and renew our commitment through confession. Sin – our rejection of God – matters *to* God; it grieves God to the heart.

Third, we need to be careful not to jump to the conclusion that just because God doesn’t replicate a Red Sea type of deliverance it means that God has abandoned us. Our hope does *not* rely on God’s acting today in the same way that God acted in those ancient stories, but it *does* rely on God’s character being the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Our faith is in a God who hears our cries, a God who will keep his promises. It is *this* faith in God’s commitment to justice and mercy that has sustained God’s

¹⁶ See Isa 63:15

¹⁷ Isa 64:1-4. Isaiah goes on to exclaim: “From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him,” (Isa 64:4). Paul adapts this in 1 Cor 2:9.

¹⁸ Isa 64:5b-7.

¹⁹ Isa 64:6-7.

²⁰ Isa 64:8.

²¹ See: Gen 2:7 (Adam was made from clay, *adama*); Jer 18:1-23; Isa 29:16; Lam 4:2; Job 10:8-12, 33:6.

²² Isa 64:9-12.

people through the darkest periods of suffering in the past. Consequently, from this perspective, traditional Jewish lament does *not* invoke the past as nostalgia, nor does it belittle our present despair; rather, it draws on the collective memories of God's people as a source of *hope* for the future.

Fourth, let's remember what happened next in Isaiah's situation. God *did* act in a surprising way. Israel was released from exile and they were allowed to return to their homeland. Under the guidance of Nehemiah, they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple. But there's *not* a "they-lived-happily-ever-after" ending. Their homeland was soon taken over by a succession of foreign oppressors. Nevertheless, the rebuilt temple remained and was even extensively expanded upon by King Herod the Great.²³ But, as I mentioned at the beginning, God seemed to be silent *again* at the time of the first Advent. The people *again* waited in hope for deliverance.

Fifth, God is *full* of surprises. Mark's gospel doesn't relate a birth story for Jesus; it begins with his baptism. Mark's description of events alludes to Isaiah's anguished cry being realized in a dramatically unexpected way. He writes, "Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the *heavens torn apart* and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."²⁴ Recall that Isaiah wanted "God to *rip open* the heavens and come down"²⁵; Mark suggests that precisely what God did in Jesus, revealing God to the whole world.²⁶ Paul also writes to the Corinthians that his mission was to proclaim to them God's *hidden* wisdom which has been *revealed* in Messiah Jesus, somewhat bizarrely through his crucifixion – rather than his birth.²⁷ He then quotes from this passage from Isaiah: "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"²⁸ and reinterprets that as God's surprising revelation of himself to the world in Jesus Christ.²⁹ God is always full of surprises. Who would have thought of that at the first Christmas? Let's remember that today.

Sixth, and finally, Jewish lament gives us permission to shout at God! I would say that it's a healthy and necessary thing to do in dark times. Even so, if all we do is rant, then it's as if we are stuck in the initial "stages" of grief. How do we get beyond that point? Here the images of God as *Father* and as the Potter are helpful, because it contrasts the God who is hidden with a God who is personal and intimate. This challenges us to consider our beliefs in God's very nature. In our suffering, *can* we exclaim with Isaiah, "*Yet Lord you are our Father*"?³⁰ If we can hold tight to that *relational partnership* with God, then we can wait in *hope*. In this season of Advent, be vigilant and be ready to be surprised as we wait in hope. Amen.

²³ 516 BCE and 70 CE is referred to as the "2nd Temple Period." See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Temple .

²⁴ Mark 1:10-11.

²⁵ Isa 64:1.

²⁶ See Isa 64:2b.

²⁷ See 1 Cor 2:1-8. (see also 1 Cor 1:18-31.)

²⁸ See 1 Cor 2:9, (Paul adapts Isa 64:4).

²⁹ See 1 Cor 2:10-16.

³⁰ Isa 63:16; 64:8.