

“O That You Would Come Down!”

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Based upon Isaiah 64:1-8; Luke 6:46-49

What do you call a season when the temperatures are telling us that it is spring, the leaves on the ground are telling us it's fall, and the calendar is telling us that it is time to put up Christmas decorations? At the moment, my plants seem to be calling it "Ladvent." I noticed this the other day when I discovered that both my outdoor Lenten roses and my indoor Christmas cactus are about to bloom. Each of these plants has been cultivated to bloom for a particular season, seasons which are separated on the calendar by about eight months. But the plants do not know what month it is and are both covered with blossoms getting ready to bloom. Maybe that's a sign that at least one has been confused by climate change. Then again, maybe it's a sign that they know something we have forgotten because it seems that they are not the only things that appear out of sync. Did you hear the Old Testament lesson just now? Here we are on the first Sunday of Advent, the day the candle tells us we are supposed to be celebrating hope, the day which unofficially marks in many people's minds the time when it is appropriate to deck the halls, put out the Christmas lights, and enjoy Christmas music without feeling like you are betraying Thanksgiving (like all the stores did). Today is the day a happy new liturgical year begins, and yet the Lectionary has decided to kick off the year by dropping us in the middle of a two chapter-long communal lament in Third Isaiah. We expect this time of year to hear First Isaiah's prophecy about the one who is to come who will be called "Wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace." (Is. 11). But we don't expect to have to begin a season of twinkle lights and good cheer with the textual equivalent of a Lenten dark night of the soul. So what gives? We can't blame the text selection on global warming. Maybe it was a typo? Chapter 65 includes one of the most wonderful, encouraging speeches God gave through the prophets, the one in which God says, "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth," and talks about a time when "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together." That would be a much more encouraging way to begin the season.

But alas, that is not where the Lectionary sends us, and there is no mistake. If you've been raised in the church then you know that every year in Advent, before we can get to the joy, joy, joy-part of the season, we first have to pass through the prophetic part, either by being confronted by John the Baptist calling us a brood of vipers, or by stepping into the spiritual turmoil of the story of Israel's exile. You may remember that last week, we heard from Ezekiel, who prophesied before and during the Babylonian Exile, that God was going to send a good shepherd to rescue the sheep. After decades of saying, "Don't make me come down there!" God finally said, "That's it! I've had enough. I'm coming down there." Well God did not come in Jesus at that time; that didn't happen for 450 years. But God did ultimately liberate the people from exile through a Persian Emperor named Cyrus, whom the prophets at the time called God's chosen messiah. He saved what was left of the Israelites by allowing them to leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem and their homeland at long last.

Oh what a sight greeted them when they returned, however! Although the Jerusalem of their dreams had carried them through the exile, the Jerusalem they found was rubble, so was the Temple. Suddenly it didn't feel like they had been rescued anymore. It felt like they had been abandoned by God all over again. So the prophet scholars call "Third Isaiah," because he was the third one to follow in the footsteps of the original, cried out on behalf of the people. The communal lament begins in Chapter 63 with a recitation of all the amazing things that God had done for the people's ancestors in the past. It celebrates how God saved them from slavery in Egypt through Moses. It celebrates God's faithfulness since Abraham in claiming the people of Israel as God's children, and giving them the Promised Land. But then the tone shift from celebration to grief and blame. "Why did *you* make us stray from your ways?" the people cry. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at your presence... to make your name known to your adversaries so that the nations might tremble at your presence." In other words, "Hey God, who worked great miracles in the past, who divided seas and made Pharaoh and his men shake in their shoes, how about some of that action now! Show us that you still exist. Show us that you care. Show our adversaries that they haven't got a chance against us because you are still all-powerful and still on our side. Protect us; don't punish us anymore."

Haven't we all prayed something similar at some point in our lives? "Hey God, I read about all your great powers in Scripture to work miracles, how come you don't do that anymore? Where are you? Our worlds, our lives, are a mess, and we're in this mess because you aren't here. If only Jesus were actually physically here right now he could fix this. He would fix this. If you actually care, then why have you allowed the situation to get this bad and why does it feel as though you have left the building? Come down, come down please and fix this!"

This past year we have had so many reasons to pray this way. We may not have been taken from our country to live in a foreign land, but enough bad things have happened to make it feel as though we are living in spiritual exile: the rise in racism and hate crimes, the devastation of fires and hurricanes, the irrational and terrifying gun violence, the sky rocketing number of abused women coming forward, the threats from Korea, the uncertainty about health care, the evidence of global warming going unabated. "O that you would come down God!" And that's not even mentioning all the stuff that has happened in our personal lives and in our community. So many this past year have suffered through major health crises. Many have lost loved ones. Many have children struggling. Some are worried about jobs; some about health care. "O that you would come down God!"

Every year we start Advent in a dark place because even though the advertisers want us to embrace joy, joy, joy, so we will shop, shop, shop, in the Church we strive to be honest not just holly jolly. The truth is that our world is not as God would have it be, and we know it. We can see it and feel it each day. This is not the kingdom of God Christ described. In fact, at times it is so far from it, that it can make us feel as if God must be on vacation or not care about us or both. So we begin the new year by acknowledging our need for God and for the redemption of our world. "Please come on down," we pray. "We need a good shepherd; we need a savior. We need you."

When the Israelites prayed in this lament, what they really wanted was a divine warrior, which is why they use the language of earthquake and fire. They wanted God to make a show of divine power that would be totally unmistakable, squash their adversaries, and restore their Promised Land. But they had been in exile long enough, and remember their history well enough to realize that their prayer was a risky one. If God actually came down full of power and might to judge the world and punish the sinful, then what would God think of them? Even though they blamed God for causing them to sin by failing to police them personally, they still knew in their hearts that if God actually came down, God would see that they were as unfaithful as their adversaries were.

There was a wonderful M*A*S*H episode (that TV show has great illustrations of so many things), in which Father Mulcahy learned that the head bishop was going to come visit the camp. Suddenly instead of being a place where he helped the sick and comforted his colleagues, the M*A*S*H unit looked like a den of iniquity. People were drinking themselves drunk in the officer's club, and shooting craps and swearing near the mess tent. Father Mulcahy was horrified that the bishop would not see what a great medical unit they were; he would see only their sinful behavior.

Have you ever imagined what it would be like if Christ really did come down and spend Christmas with you in person? If you got a card in the mail saying, "I'm coming to spend the holiday with you this year. Love, Jesus" what would you do in the next four weeks? Would you clean and redecorate your house like Martha did when she heard Jesus was coming to visit? Would you read the whole Bible cover to cover so you could demonstrate that you were grounded in the Word like Mary? Would you quickly volunteer in a homeless shelter, give up alcohol and donuts, or change your reading material or Netflix list? What about the messes that are harder to hide—the less than loving relationships you have with your in-laws, your neighbors, your work colleagues? The way you spend your money or prioritize your time? What about the pride, fear, selfishness in your heart?

The Israelites knew that if God was going to come down than they better improve their case by coming clean. So in today's section of the lament, from verses 5 to 7, they confess their sins. "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth... There is no one who calls on our name or attempts to take hold of you." In the hundreds of pages of text which make up the prophetic books of the Old Testament, there are few confessions which are so honest. Usually the people are defensive and live in denial. Usually the people blame God or turn a deaf ear to the prophets' pleas. So scholars celebrate these verse as a remarkable soul-bearing moment for the Israelites, even though they still blame their bad behavior on the fact that God hid from them and wasn't there to police them. "We are the clay and you are our potter," the people cry. It's partly a plaintive cry for God not to abandon humanity, God's greatest creative work, and partly a brave invitation to God to rework us. It is a step toward restoring their relationship and faithfulness at the same time.

This is what we are called to do to as we prepare for the coming of our Lord. Although the secular world jumps straight to Christmas earlier and earlier each year, for Christians, we cannot get to Christmas without going through Advent, which even before my flowers started blooming

used to be called, a “little Lent.” During this time of waiting and preparation, we are called not just to pray for our Lord to come down, but also to consider honestly what Jesus would find if he showed up on our door steps on the 25th. We are called to focus not so much on the dirty socks that are always on our bedroom floor, and out of date salad dressings in our fridges, which Jesus wouldn’t care about, as on the emotional equivalent of these things in our hearts, which he would. We are called both to clean up our act, and to open ourselves to God’s reworking.

“Why do you call me Lord, Lord but do not do what I tell you?” Jesus asks in today’s Gospel lesson. We live in a dark world and a messy time. So it is appropriate for us to cry out, “O God would that you could come down!” It is also understandable if we lament that God is not like a super hero, willing to step in and squash the bad guys, or like a supernatural Robovac, able to tidy up and vacuum away all of our messes and leave us sparkling clean. But if we are going to be faithful and honest, we must admit that our world is having the problems it is because of human decisions, not divine ones. We should be able to be more faithful without God having to stand over us like a parent with a disappointed expression on his face or a policeman with his ticket book open. So if our world is getting darker and darker, it is not because God has withdrawn the light, it’s because we are withdrawing from it.

Chapter 65 of *Isaiah*, which the Lectionary left out, makes this clear. After the people complain about God hiding and abandoning them, God replies, “I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here I am, here I am’ to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices.” Those are haunting words, but they are also comforting because they remind us that even when we can’t see or feel God, God is still with us. God never left the Israelites and will never leave us. Although we will spend the next four weeks preparing to welcome Christ with twinkle lights and song, he has already arrived. He came knowing that he would be stepping into our mess. He came knowing about the socks, the salad dressing, our hate, and our fear. But he didn’t come to judge us. He came to save us by showing us how to be more faithful. He is our hope, and our help, our reason for celebrating and repenting. He is the answer to our prayers.

When the world is as troubled as ours is, we all yearn for joy and light. Maybe that’s one reason why the secular Christmas season keeps starting earlier and earlier. We want to manufacture a feeling that we haven’t spent much of the year feeling. But the darkness in our world and in our hearts cannot be healed with decorations and presents. It will only be healed when we stop blaming God and start seeking God instead, when we confess our need and open ourselves to our potter’s kneading. As my flowers now proclaim, the one who is to come, came not to judge but to save us, by being with us in our mess, and showing us the way out of it. Thanks be to God! Amen.