

The First Sunday in Advent (Advent 1B), November 29, 2020

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The Three Advents: God Comes Down

Isaiah 64:1–9; Mark 11:1–10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

The Prophet Isaiah prayed, **“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down”** (Isa 64:1a). Seven hundred years later this is how His prayer was answered: **The disciples brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and He sat on it. And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!”** (Mk 11:7–10).

“Oh that You would rend the heavens and come down” (Is 64:1). Have you ever prayed like that? It’s what Isaiah prayed. He prayed for God to tear open the skies, rip apart the veil, and come down; for Him to descend from on high and stir things up; for Him to turn the world upside down, shake it loose from its false sense of security, from its apathy and lethargy, from its futility and meaninglessness. Turn up the heat, O Lord, and make it boil! **“Make Your name known to Your adversaries”** (Is 64:2). Awe the nations with Your power.

2.

That was Isaiah’s prayer. But what Isaiah experienced was far different. He didn’t see God acting in might for His people. There were no mighty works, no wonders to fill the world with awe. No—Isaiah felt a separation between God and man. He sensed a great divide, a chasm. Heaven was shut. God was silent. He seemed absent. He appeared uninvolved. Why had God hidden His face? Why had He turned away from His people? Because **all our righteous deeds**—the very best humanity has to show—they **are all like a polluted garment**, like filthy rags (Is 64:6). That’s what Isaiah says. It was our fault, all our fault. No one to blame but ourselves. So God was silent and unknown, unfeared, unloved, untrusted. He was dishonored and disrespected. **“Come down”** was a cry for help—come and set right, rescue, save! **You were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been for a long time, and shall we be saved? We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities take us away** (Is 64:5b; 6b); like last leaf of fall ripped off by the wind that whistles for deadly winter. Will God come before we’re all gone?

And why should He come? Why would He even care? What's in it for Him? His creation, that's what! His creation and all His creatures! **Now, O Lord, You are our Father, we are the clay, and You are our potter; we are all the work of Your hand** (Is 64:8). So don't be angry any longer! Remember not our sin, but remember us! Behold Your creation! Please look! **We are all Your people** (Is 64:9). Don't despise what You made! Don't toss it aside! Reclaim us, O Lord.

Isaiah prays for God to come down again, anew, afresh. "Come down" is the constant prayer of God's people. It's our prayer still, our Advent prayer. It's the longing of our hearts. We want God to come again. But there's nothing we can do to make it happen. We can't force Him to come. We can't manipulate or coerce Him into coming. We can't push His buttons and get a reaction. He'll come *if* He wants to and *when* He wants to and *how* He wants to.

Come down, like You did in the past! Like You did for Israel through blood and water in the Exodus! Come down, like You did on Mount Sinai with thunder and lightning! Come down, like You came to the tabernacle in the cloud of glory! Deliver us from our sins, from death, and from the power of the devil! Show Your power! Fill the whole earth with Your glory!

We pray that He would rend the heavens. Make it happen again, and soon. Will God be silent? Will He hide because of sin? But we are Your creation. Do not forsake us. Will He ever rend the heavens? Will He come?

2.

The word "advent" means "coming." We may use it to talk about the arrival of a notable person, thing, or event. In the Church, we use it to talk about the coming of God to His people.

God has come. He answered Isaiah's prayer, though perhaps not in the way Isaiah expected. You could see it happening when Jesus stepped into the water of the Jordan River. Suddenly it all became clear. The heavens were torn open, they were rent asunder and then they stayed open. God revealed His face. It looked like the face of a first-century Jew. He showed His mighty hand and His outstretched arm. They were the hands and arms of a carpenter from Nazareth. Jesus, our brother, with flesh and blood like us. We pray for God to rend the heavens, and this is His answer. We pray for Him not to look at our sin, and He responds by putting His beloved Son in the water with sinners and bringing Him out laden with the sin of the world.

Then Jesus came to Jerusalem, to the gates of the city, this God incarnate, man divine. Some coming that was! He came sitting on a colt. **The Lord has need of it** (Mk 10:3). Cloaks of commoners served as His red carpet; palm branches cut from the fields as His banners. A motley crew of misfits went before and after Him shouting, “**Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!**” (Mk 11:9–10). God comes. The kingdom comes. But a strange kingdom. No thunder and lightning, no violence, no armor, no power of any kind. No anger or wrath, no cracking heads together or blasting sinners from the earth. He rends the heavens and comes on a donkey with gentleness and kindness, with humility and lowliness. Not in the earthquake or the fire or the roaring wind, but with a still, small voice, like a gentle dew from heaven. We pray for God to come and save us, and this is His answer. We pray for Him not to look at our sin, and He responds by stretching out the arms of His beloved Son on the cross, through blood. We pray for Him to rend the heavens, and the temple curtain is torn in two as Jesus dies. This is how God responded Isaiah’s prayer and to ours long ago—with the first Advent of Jesus Christ.

And that’s not all. God comes still. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us and not far away. He promised never to leave us nor forsake us. He promised to be with us to the very end of the age. He keeps His promises. He comes now, but not to die again. That’s over and done with. It is finished. He will never die again; death no longer has any power over Him. He comes now risen from the dead, wholly alive. He lays His cross over the chasm that divides heaven and earth. He take up the sin that separates you from God. But it’s a strange coming still. “Rend the heavens and come down,” we pray, and He does come to us and to all nations—in His Holy Word, in His Holy Sacraments. He comes through the still, small voice of Scripture read and preached, through the life-giving water of Baptism, His body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine of this altar. Jesus rides right through the gates of ears and mouth to make His throne in our hearts. That’s how He finds His way to you. That’s how He establishes His reign and rule in Your life. That’s how He serves you as your Lord. That’s how He takes your sin and gives you His righteousness, takes Your death and gives You His life, takes Your hell and gives You His heaven. He is the potter; we are the clay. He comes and claims us as His own. This is how God responds to Isaiah’s prayer and to ours now—with the sacramental Advent of Jesus Christ.

Still, we pray that He would rend the heavens and come down. And He will come. He will come again. He will come riding not on a donkey or on bread and wine, but on the clouds. No gate will bar His way, for the very gates of heaven and earth will be shaken, and the pillars of the earth will crumble. Every knee will bow, and every tongue confess Him as Lord. **You wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ**, St. Paul writes, **who**

will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, the great day of His coming again in glory. **God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord** (1 Cor 1:7–9). This is how God responds to Isaiah’s prayer and to ours in the future—with the final Advent, the second coming, the return of Jesus Christ in glory.

Today we prayed: “Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and be saved by Your mighty deliverance.” He came in the flesh. He comes now in the Word and Sacraments. He will come again in glory. Come, we pray, rule in our hearts and lives, rule in our homes and work, rule in us. Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

IN THESE THREE ADVENTS,
GOD ANSWERS OUR PRAYER BY COMING DOWN TO US IN JESUS CHRIST.

What Jesus came and did *then*, He comes and gives to us *now*, until He comes again *soon* to answer our prayer finally and fully. Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down!

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
