

First Sunday of Advent, Year B, 2023

Isaiah 64.1:9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!

Doesn't that echo our own cry, if we're honest?

God, *Come down to make your name known ..., cause the nations to quake*

Wouldn't we just love God to do that right now? To come down and sort out the mess that the world is in. To cause the nations in the Middle East, in Ukraine, in Myanmar or any number of trouble spots we could mention to quake, to get round the negotiating table and sort themselves out.

But that's not the way it works. God is not at our beck and call for us to command according to our wishes. Isaiah writes, verse four, that *God ... acts on behalf of those who wait for him.*

We are not the ones to command the situation. We are to wait for God.

And sometimes – maybe always – the waiting is longer than we want or expect.

400 years passed after Isaiah wrote *Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down* before God did.

Came down two thousand plus years ago and entered our space as a baby in a manger at Bethlehem, a baby who grew to see the heavens rent at his baptism in the Jordan.

As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:16-17)

This moment that expresses the unity of the Trinity, was a moment *heaven was opened* and God rent the heavens and came down, Emmanuel, God with us.

Isaiah was not wrong in wishing *Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!* After all, God did, but he did it while the world was waiting. Some, like Simeon in the temple when Jesus was presented as a baby (Luke 2:25-27a) were actively waiting.

God *acts on behalf of those who wait for him*, writes Isaiah, not on behalf of those who decide for him what he should do.

And don't we sometimes do that without realising? Rather than finding out what God is doing and joining in, as Archbishop Rowan Williams put it.

I know I do. I am inclined to tell God how he should go about bringing my son-in-law to faith, or my sister back to God.

But God wants us to wait for him. What does that mean?

The commentary tells me that:

“Biblically speaking, ‘to wait’ is to manifest the kind of trust that is willing to commit itself to God over the long haul....It is to believe that it is better for something to happen in God's time than for it to happen on my initiative in my time.” (John N Oswalt)

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down! But, please, not now Lord unless this is your time. Do it in your perfect timing. We will wait for your timing and your initiative.

But will we? Do we actually believe that God has a perfect timing, that he will do it, that there is a time coming when God will sort things out and resolve the issues?

A time when he will answer our prayers, even if that's not in our lifetime. If we do believe this, then waiting takes the pressure off.

We do not have to try and make it happen unlike those who are marching in our cities trying to change things in Gaza.

Even so, waiting is not passive but active. It's not putting our desires on the back burner and ignoring them until God acts. It is still to weep and pray over the situation. It is to be watchful in waiting – as in the parable in our gospel reading today – looking to see what God will do. And as we wait we trust God to bring about the outcome that he desires in his own time, *Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth...*”

In verse five Isaiah writes *You come to the help of those who gladly do right.* Waiting is not passive but active. And active waiting is enabled by righteousness, obedience, living life as God would wish it.

At the end of our passage in Isaiah the people realise that the sin in their lives, their failure to be holy as God requires, means that they have no actual right to expect God to act on their behalf.

They cannot instruct him to do anything; he is the Potter. They have even contributed to their situation by their waywardness. So, conscious of their innate sinfulness all they can do is confess and implore God to be gracious and merciful.

Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord; do not remember our sins for ever. Oh, look upon us we pray, for we are all your people.

God has looked upon us. He has lifted up the light of his countenance upon us. The God who rent the heavens and came down in Bethlehem has made provision for our righteousness, through his death and resurrection; provision for forgiveness and provision to empower us to live godly lives.

Because Emmanuel is still here with us now by his Spirit, God in us, *Christ in you, the hope of glory* (Colossians 1:27).

And this enables us to pull God's activity down into our own space. It changes the dynamic of watching and waiting. Because, with his Spirit in us, we have the mind of Christ. We can be privy to his agenda. We can see what God is doing and join in, both by discerning what to pray and by action.

In the parable in our gospel reading the servants are to go about their assigned tasks even while they are watching and waiting for the Master's inevitable return, as we do, when he will restore everything to its proper order.

And as we walk in the Spirit we may discover that the tasks assigned to us accord with the very agenda for which we are watching, praying and waiting, whether that be peace in Gaza or the extension of God's kingdom here in West Linton – or both of course.

Maybe it will be to march for peace, to write to our MP, to give humanitarian assistance with goods, money or even ourselves. Maybe it will be to explore together action that expresses God's heart and helps to usher in God's kingdom here, in our community.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, a time when we remember that we stand between the past, the first Advent in Bethlehem and the future second Advent when Jesus will come again in person. So let us be determined to live in the good of the rent heavens and Emmanuel, God with us, confessing our sins and striving to be holy as he is holy.

And, thereby, let us watch and wait in confident hope of a further Advent, when the Prince of Peace will rend the heavens once more and come down to bring peace on earth and take his faithful people home.

Yes, God has already rent the heavens and come down. He is here in this community – in us. We are the ones to make his name known, to bring a little bit of heaven to impinge on those around us. So, as we wait and pray for the fullness of his kingdom to come in, let us be waiting, not only for God, but also on God, watching for him to reveal his agenda and joining in to extend his kingdom.

Amen

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3 December 2023