

O That You Would Rend the Heavens

Isaiah 64:1-9

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin this morning with a word about the nativity display to my left. I know people have different opinions about this.

Some feel that the season of Advent and Christmas should be kept separate. Advent is about preparing for the birth of Christ, so we should hold off on all the Christmas stuff – the nativity, the carols, the decorations, the tree, etc. until Christmas actually arrives.

Others are fine with the seasons of Christmas and Advent kind of blending together. Yes, Advent is about anticipation and longing for the Christ child, but Christ *has* in fact come. The first Advent has happened. We don't long for it in the same way that people before Christ's birth did.

This week, I read one way of describing Advent that I resonated with:

The season of Advent in the Christian calendar anticipates the "coming of Christ" from three different perspectives: the physical nativity in Bethlehem, the reception of Christ in the heart of the believer, and the eschatological Second Coming.

Fundamentally, as Christians, we are waiting, preparing for longing for Christ's second Advent, when he comes again in glory.

And on this view, it's fine to sing carols, to have all the Christmas decorations in advance of the actual season of Christmas (the twelve days between Christmas Eve and Epiphany).

I would put myself in the latter camp. I'm a big fan of the Christian calendar, of telling time according to the story of Jesus. I like Advent and Lent and the way that they train our hearts in the disciplines of repentance and hope and preparation.

But these foundational realities of the Christian faith — incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit — these truths weave their way through all of our days.

We can and we should celebrate “out of time.” It’s ok if we “get the order wrong.” I think the hope of Christ is too deep and wide and true and life-giving to be confined to certain seasons on our calendars.

So, this is part of the reason why it’s ok to put a Nativity display out, to sing carols, etc. before Christmas.

On this First Sunday of Advent 2023, I want to begin with a very simple observation. **The world is not as it should be.**

This is among the more obvious things one could say, surely. We see this all around us, right?

This is true from the global to the intensely personal.

There are wars and rumours of war. There is appalling violence and cruel loss of life. There is poverty and chaos and all kinds of social breakdown.

There is the polarization of our moment with people going to metaphorical war over ideas and issues and politics.

There is the decline of institutions and churches, a crisis of meaning that is contributing to rampant addiction of all kinds and anxiety and depression and loneliness.

There are kids growing up without stable parents and having to fend for themselves far too early in their lives.

There is a crude and shallow culture emerging where we are endlessly distracted by our various devices, where we are lulled into lethargy by the endless entertainment options available to us, but we struggle to give ourselves to anything meaningful or good or worthwhile.

And then we could drill down even deeper and acknowledge that when it comes to our relationships with others and with ourselves. Here, too, things are not as they should be.

We struggle to love those that God has called us to love as we ought to. We blunder down the same dead-ends over and over again. We struggle to leave behind those things in our lives that we know are doing us harm.

We so easily drift away from God. We are, as the famous hymn puts it, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; Prone to leave the God I love.”

For Christians, Advent is one of the seasons of the Christian calendar where we take ***all of this*** — our longing that God would act and make everything from the big global stuff to the profoundly personal and relational stuff right — and we direct it toward God.

The language in our text from Isaiah today is abrupt, even violent.

O that you would rend the heavens and come down...

The Hebrew word that is translated “tear” or “rend” is used in other places in Scripture to describe the tearing of clothing to express grief and despair.

This is not a Hallmark-y longing for Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

This is forceful, expectant, even *angry* language! It is a demand that God right the wrongs of history, to act for justice, to cause the earth itself to tremble and heave and groan.

The language of Isaiah strips away all religious pretense and piety. What our world needs, what we need is a dramatic overhaul. Not a bit of tinkering around the edges, but a radical upending, a destructive reordering of “business as usual.”

We’ve seen enough of injustice. We’ve seen enough of war. We’ve seen enough of disharmony. We’ve seen enough of death and disease.

Advent is where we acknowledge our longing for things to be better than they are, where we say, “*We cannot mend all the things that are broken. We cannot do this on our own. **We need you. Come down!!!***”

Come down and fix the world. Come down and fix us.

Because, again, part of the reason that things are not as they should be is because *we* are not as *we* should be.

Our text in Isaiah does not stop with a pleading for God to come and fix all the big, bad things in our world. He doesn't say, "God if you could just fix it all, we'll be over here on the sideline cheering you on while you clean up the mess."

Isaiah holds the mirror up to his people fairly ruthlessly. Indeed, he spends *most* of his time — looking inward.

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.

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.

This text *is* a cry that God would kick down the door and make things new.

But it is also a very deep and profound acknowledgment that we are part of what needs to be made new.

We do not love God and neighbour as we ought to. We do not "strive to lay hold of God." We want the world to be a better place, yet so often we turn away from injustice or refuse to recognize the ways in which we contribute to it.

We are sinners. Even our righteous deeds are like filthy rags, Isaiah says.

How desperately we need these words — this truth — in a time when so many are so convinced of their righteousness and so eager to condemn those who do not share their vision of the world.

O that you would tear open the heavens... O that you would break down the door...

O that you would come to our world (and to our lives!) and make things right...

These are among the deepest longings that we have...

But Isaiah knows that these longings must be accompanied by, *O that you would restore us, and make us into a people prepared for your coming!*

Advent is a time to remember our place. It is a time to remember that we are poor and incomplete, that while we can do many things to bring about a more just order, while we can do many things to align ourselves with the intentions of God, **the new creation that all of our longing finally points toward can only be a gift of God.**

The former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams put it beautifully in a sermon on Advent:

The Advent tension is a way of learning again that God is God: that between even our deepest and holiest longing and the reality of God is a gap which only grace can cross.¹

I love that line. A gap which only grace can cross. The gap between what is and what ought to be, in our world and in our lives.

And it is a gap which grace *has* in fact, crossed. A gap that grace continues to cross again and again and again. And a gap that grace will cross at the end of all things, when Christ will come again in glory.

Our text this morning concludes with the well-loved image:

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

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.

These words anchor us theologically as we enter the Advent season. We are not our own. We are clay, to be shaped by the potter's hand.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgment: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), 11.

From what I understand, making pottery is not a pleasant experience for the clay. There is a great deal of kneading, pounding, shaping, twisting, reshaping, etc.

But this is the best and safest place for us to be, because it is only here that the Potter can do his work. It is only here that the clay can be turned from a lifeless, shapeless lump into something useful and beautiful, something that reflects the Potter's creativity, skill, and purpose.

And so, with the prophet Isaiah, with people of faith down through the ages who have found in his words expression for their restlessness, their longing, their grief over the world, their sorrow for their sin, their deep and abiding hope that God can ultimately be trusted to make new what has grown old and stale, we say:

Rend the heavens, O God. Burst upon our scene. Judge and heal and redeem all that is wicked and wasting away in our world (including in us!), we pray.

Come, Lord Jesus. We are waiting.

Amen.

