

## ***“The Empty Heart”***

### **Scripture**

**Isaiah 64:1-8** (*The Message*)

<sup>1</sup>Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and descend, make the mountains shudder at your presence - <sup>2</sup>As when a forest catches fire, as when fire makes a pot to boil - <sup>3</sup>To shock your enemies into facing you, make the nations shake in their boots! You did terrible things we never expected, descended and made the mountains shudder at your presence. <sup>4</sup>Since before time began no one has ever imagined, No ear heard, no eye seen, a God like you who works for those who wait for him. <sup>5</sup>You meet those who happily do what is right, who keep a good memory of the way you work. But how angry you've been with us! We've sinned and kept at it so long! Is there any hope for us? Can we be saved?

<sup>6</sup>We're all sin-infected, sin-contaminated. Our best efforts are grease-stained rags. We dry up like autumn leaves - sin-dried, we're blown off by the wind. <sup>7</sup>No one prays to you or makes the effort to reach out to you Because you've turned away from us, left us to stew in our sins. <sup>8</sup>Still, God, you are our Father. We're the clay and you're our potter: All of us are what you made us. <sup>9</sup>Don't be too angry with us, O God. Don't keep a permanent account of wrongdoing. Keep in mind, please, we are your people - all of us.

*(NRSV)*

<sup>1</sup>O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— <sup>2</sup>as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! <sup>3</sup>When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

<sup>6</sup>We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. <sup>7</sup>There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. <sup>8</sup>Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. <sup>9</sup>Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

**Mark 13:24-37** (*The Message*)

<sup>24</sup>Following those hard times, Sun will fade out, moon cloud over, <sup>25</sup>Stars fall out of the sky, cosmic powers tremble. <sup>26</sup>And then they'll see the Son of Man

enter in grand style, his Arrival filling the sky - no one will miss it! <sup>27</sup>He'll dispatch the angels; they will pull in the chosen from the four winds, from pole to pole.

<sup>28</sup>"Take a lesson from the fig tree. From the moment you notice its buds form, the merest hint of green, you know summer's just around the corner. <sup>29</sup>And so it is with you. When you see all these things, you know he is at the door. <sup>30</sup>Don't take this lightly. I'm not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too - these things will happen. <sup>31</sup>Sky and earth will wear out; my words won't wear out. <sup>32</sup>"But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven's angels, not even the Son. Only the Father. <sup>33</sup>So keep a sharp lookout, for you don't know the timetable. <sup>34</sup>It's like a man who takes a trip, leaving home and putting his servants in charge, each assigned a task, and commanding the gatekeeper to stand watch. <sup>35</sup>So, stay at your post, watching. You have no idea when the homeowner is returning, whether evening, midnight, cockcrow, or morning. <sup>36</sup>You don't want him showing up unannounced, with you asleep on the job. <sup>37</sup>I say it to you, and I'm saying it to all: Stay at your post. Keep watch."

*(NRSV)*

<sup>24</sup>"But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup>and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. <sup>26</sup>And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup>And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

<sup>28</sup>"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup>Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place. <sup>31</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>32</sup>"But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup>Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup>It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup>Watch therefore--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning-- <sup>36</sup>lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. <sup>37</sup>And what I say to you I say to all: Watch."

Lindsay Armstrong has a novel way of introducing Advent to us. She speaks of her young daughter who is a combustible combination of hope and disquiet at the same time. The fire is fueled by having the first shopping days over and done with, followed by the start of gifts wrapped in ways evident enough to start her pleadings. The little girl is asking once again to open one present

early, just this year. And on the other side her parents are redrawing their line, “not a chance.” “Pleeeeeease?”

Lindsay describes her daughter as having “green eyes wide open. Her face is flushed from the exertion of pulling on heart strings.” And when the response back is a firm, “No’ – with very little effort, her face begins turning as red as her fiery hair as she pleads, offering up every imaginable argument to her unmoved parents (or at least, an unmoved mother, for the father is known to sometimes switch teams).” Armstrong, says: “truth be told, I envy my daughter’s passion. As her parents, we will continue teaching her to faithfully direct her desires, carefully considering what she allows to take hold in her mind and heart.”

Good for the Armstrongs. Yet, it isn’t always that easy discerning a path between the whispers of hope in this season amidst the season’s thundering chaos posing in the guise of muscular optimism, which sometimes breaks through in raw pieces of rage and despair. “What is it that we desire?” asks Lindsay Armstrong. “What are our best desires? And what does it mean for us that our deepest and our best yearnings do not always match?”

It’s intriguing that quite apart from our personal psychological wrestling matches with consumerism, the barometer and the variety of awkward family dynamics which come visiting at holiday time that Advent comes with its own dilemmas. Just when we want to turn God for solace and encouragement, of romantic stories about an angel attended holy mother-to-be riding bareback on a humble donkey to the manger in Bethlehem where she will bear the Savior of the world, instead we hear of readings about a gathering storm of tribulation and apocalypse. We hear a prophet calling for God to rip open the skies above us and to come down to earth shaking the mountains and setting the forests ablaze. The church lectionary, like a good stick in the eye, wants to remind us that the word, “Advent,” which means “coming,” doesn’t not limit its storytelling about God’s coming into the world to Luke’s pastoral scene where the animals magically talk of Jesus’ birthday. No, the coming hope is as red-faced as a girl deprived of a sneak preview of Christmas morning, wanting to enter into her joy but instead having to hear a “no,” leaving her left asking what better thing there could be which comes to those who wait.

As I read our passage from Isaiah, what struck me is that the prophet is almost asking God to come down to earth in anger and with wrath. Maybe you’ve seen those signs or a picture of them forwarded around the internet: Jesus is coming back again and watch out, he is livid! And why would Isaiah want that? Another of the prophets cautions those who want the Day of the Lord: You don’t want the Day of the Lord, it is dark and destructive. Yet, as I read Isaiah, it is the silence which is the real problem. He’d rather have God come down to earth full of wrath than God, moping, giving us the silent treatment, hiding out on the other side of the universe. “Come to us!” Isaiah pleads. “We are lost in your absence.”

I don’t know, in some strange way, I’m glad for this kind of news. That God gets to say, “no,” that God doesn’t have a cell phone in his pocket that rings: “pick up,” every time we call, says something about God being both sovereign and free. If God isn’t free from all the whims I have, wanting to open presents on

Thanksgiving weekend, rally the San Diego Chargers to the most surprising Super Bowl in NFL history, take off the pound or two of turkey I gained with a heartfelt prayer, well – I'm not so sure that's a God I will really trust in the end.

Did you know that it was 430 years between Joseph taking his family to Egypt to avoid the famine in Palestine and God speaking to Moses out of the burning bush? "My people are oppressed and I have heard their cry. Tell them that 'I am who I am' has sent you to them, Moses, the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for now I am coming to rescue them." It's almost a footnote in the story. God did not speak to the people of promise for 430 years. As slaves in Egypt, making bricks without straw, loathed by Pharaoh and their Egyptian neighbor alike, how many prophets might there have been who cried out "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down." Yet for 430 years, God was silent.

Why is that? In the subsequent story about the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites took what seemed a wrong turn on their way to the Promised Land. Seemingly misdirected, they marched right down a peninsula to a point where they were boxed in by the sea. Pharaoh, coming to his senses, had his army on their tracks by this point, setting up the "Wonder at the Sea," the Israelites exiting on dry land through two walls of water, with the Egyptian army then getting "stuck in the mud" before those walls came "a-tumblin' down." Without a 430 year conversation going, without confidence in their own piety or righteousness, in the words of biblical scholar, Brevard Childs, what happened there was that "Israel failed to believe right up to the moment of her deliverance."

Eugene Peterson puts it this way: "The story in which God does his saving work arises among a people whose primary experience of God is his absence. The Wonder at the Sea establishes it as fundamental that salvation consists in what God does; it is not a human project. We see and fear and believe and that's it. This is difficult to digest, for we grow up with and are surrounded with 'salvation projects' on all fronts (many of them in our churches) that insist that what we do, how we get involved, is critical to their success. When was the last time that we heard one of our pastors or evangelists or politicians tell us, 'You have only to keep still?' But that is what we are told here. . . . Only God did this and only God could do it." 430 years of silence, left the people only with waiting, perhaps with yearning, but a yearning that could only be fulfilled by the One who would deliver them.

Advent starts with such silence. It starts with the contradiction of wanting a gift but hearing a "no," or at least a, "not yet." It starts with an empty heart which can only be filled by the coming of One who is more than us. The silence of God, which we would fill even with wrath, because no one other thing can take the place of God, in the end invites us into a silence, a silence of waiting. In the waiting there is a vestige of hope. In the silence is our own freedom to let God be the One who is God and not us. In the silence comes a watchfulness for the One who saves us. And what a gift that will be. Amen.