

Date: November 22

Reading: Isaiah 64:1 – 9

Theme: What a state we are in!

To begin our look at Advent, I ask a simple question. “What is the biggest concern on your heart at the moment?” It might be a personal concern for yourself or family, a worry about our community, a concern about the environment or the nation, or a worry about the world. Or, you might have concerns about all four of those areas of our lives.

And if I was to ask you to come forward and write those concerns on a whiteboard, I am sure there would be at least twice as many concerns as there are people today; enough for each of us to have an even higher level of concern, “oh, yes, I hadn’t thought of that!”

While for many of us, life is good, we don’t have to look very far, or listen to many news broadcasts, to see troubling issues. At a personal level many of us, or our family, are struck by disease, by mental health issues, by financial or relationship stresses, and all of that brought to the fore and amplified by the lurking pandemic and the response in restrictions and lockdown. Some are not here today because their concern has overwhelmed their yearning for worship and community. And we look out on the world and see anger and violence, corruption and self-serving leaders, racism and nationalism, and as well as seeing the concerns and the problems, we have a yearning for people to know the faith and hope that we know. It may seem a little naïve, but we think, “If only people knew the God we know in Jesus Christ, we wouldn’t have so many problems and concerns.”

Advent is the season of waiting, but we aren’t just waiting for something good to happen, we are waiting for God to do something about all the bad. Waiting that has a longing to it, a longing made worse by all our concerns - “God, if only you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

Isaiah seems to have picked up all our concerns in the heart felt prayer from chapter 64. A prayer for God to act and bring help to Israel as the people struggle in oppression. While the scholars examining Isaiah see a composite structure and talk of 1st Isaiah and 2nd Isaiah and 3rd Isaiah, the reason the book holds together as one is that passages like the one we heard today could be written and read in any one of the time periods of Isaiah. This great prayer for God to come down addresses the anguish of the people returning from exile in Babylon, but still under foreign rule and trying to live in a devastated Jerusalem, still lying in ruins from when they were taken captive. But it could also be read as a prayer for God to come down and address the concerns of Isaiah before the exile; the corruption and greed and idolatry and suffering under the kings who had abandoned God and the Law. The great cry for God to do something that we find in so many places in scripture. The recognition that things are beyond us, beyond our best efforts, beyond our politics and laws, beyond

our science and technology, that the freedom we know as humans can so quickly become self-interest and spiral out of control. And that is why this passage can still be read today as the fervent prayer of people looking around and seeing that things are not as they should be – “You, Lord, are our Father, come and make your name known.”

And this feeling of things being bad, and out of control, and yearning for God to do something, frankly isn't helped by a passage from Mark's Gospel that seems to say, “things are going to get really bad before God comes and you won't even know when that will be.” Gospel is supposed to mean ‘good news’, this Gospel selection doesn't seem to have any good news in it! “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give light.” And if you go back a few verses, Jesus is talking about family members betraying each other and people having to run for the hills! While the scholars tell us that he talking about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans as well as the coming of the kingdom in the future, it sounds a bit like the list of our concerns, and that Jesus is talking about now, and would happily join our prayer for help – “God, if only you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

It is appropriate to begin Advent with what looks like a lament because when we look at the world, when we consider our concerns for family, for people, nations, the environment, the economy and the spiritual life of our culture, we can see how important this Advent, this something coming, this yearning in our waiting, really is. The seriousness of our concerns for the world, here and now, points us towards, and almost demands from us, a serious Christmas message. Not just ‘Happy birthday Jesus!’ or, ‘Oh, how heart wrenching, a baby in an animal feed trough.’

The Good News is not in the texts for today, it is in the texts and the faith that answer the laments and the prayers for God to act. The Good News that is a message of hope. A message that answers the prayers of Advent – In Jesus, God *has* torn apart the heavens and come down. Maybe not in the expected grand fashion, with great miracles, wrongs put right, and all the evil people taken away – like the Egyptian army when the Red Sea closed. But the birth, the shepherds, the angels, the Magi, and the prophets in the Temple all proclaim that in Jesus, God has come down, come close, and answered the prayers of yearning.

Advent calls us to face up to the world around us. Yes, it is out of control and things are beyond us, but it is also the world that God loves enough to have come close in Jesus. Yes, we do have a lot of concerns for the way the world works, but we also have the great gift of faith through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. We are waiting for God to do something to bring in the kingdom in all its fulness, but we are waiting in the light of God having already done something in bringing that kingdom to birth.

To the lament, “God, if only you would tear open the heavens and come down”, we can add, “God, you are here with us, grant us the strength and courage to meet our concerns with your love”. Reflect again on that list of concerns that we started with – are you a helpless victim in all those concerns, or are you, in faith, an agent for God's love and action?

Traditionally this first week of Advent has the theme of hope and it is hope not only for our place and relationship with God, but hope for the world, for all our concerns and all our worries. Hope that lives in the person of Jesus, but also looks forward to an unseen, unknown, but not unfelt, fulfilment of God's creation and God's kingdom. "You, Lord, are our Father, come and make your name known."

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