

“COME DOWN HOME”

Isaiah 64:1-9 December 3, 2017

One of the most popular television game shows is The Price Is Right that was hosted for many years by the long-time emcee Bob Barker. For the past ten years it has been hosted by the much loved comedian Drew Carey. When you receive tickets to attend this highly-watched, fast-moving game show, you become automatically eligible to have your name drawn to become a participant. As the show opens, names are drawn, and an announcer exclaims, “Mary Jones, come on down!” Mary excitedly jumps from her seat and runs down to the front of the game show set to compete with other contestants for an opportunity to go on the platform to guess the price of various show cases. If Mary is lucky, she will beat out the other competitors by coming the closest to the price of a certain item or items. When this happens, she runs onto the platform to compete for various prizes and show cases. Competing on The Price Is Right all begins when the announcer calls a contestant’s name and asks her to “Come on down!”

On this first Sunday of Advent we begin a four week sermon series called “Coming Home.” Today’s message is titled “Come Down Home” and the text from Isaiah 64:1-9 gives us a picture of his desire for God to reveal himself once again to his people. For Isaiah, God must appear. The great Advent hymn reveals this desire of Isaiah and of people of all times for God to come down. The hymn echoes the heart cry of humankind:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appears.

This is Isaiah's desire, but it is also our desire: that God, during this Advent Season, would reveal himself to us anew.

Sometimes the beginning of Advent can have a jarring effect on us. We have just finished the family warmth of Thanksgiving dinner and parades and football. In many churches children are already practicing the Christmas program and the bell choir is working on special Christmas music and calendars are full of Open Houses and Christmas parties and such. At home we're getting decorations out and putting up the tree and getting the cards signed and sent out, etc.: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," and more things about mountains quaking and water boiling. We think, "Well, that's a prophet, that's the Old Testament.' What do you expect?" Well, it's less than a month before Christmas; what is this all about?"

Advent is designed to remind us of why Christ came. The lessons and hymns during Advent were carefully created to help avoid rushing through December to Christmas Day without taking the time to ponder why we needed God to intervene in our lives and what we must do to be ready.

The text from Isaiah, which begins with those frightful words, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," was written in the midst of Israel's exile in Babylon and the early days of their return to the devastated and destroyed promised land. As they look at the destruction around them, the Children Of Israel are profoundly aware that they brought them on themselves. Their behavior, as individuals and as a nation, led to their destruction. And they are sorry. They remember the good things God did for them in the past, they remember how God led them, and provided for them. As verse 4 says, "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.”

They remember the bad they have done which has led to their current predicament and they remember the good that God did for them in the past. And they repent. They are deeply sorrowful for what they have done—not sorrow as a feeling, as a sentiment, as an emotion—but sorrow as an action, sorrow as a positive move in a new direction, sorrow as repentance, sorrow as the act of turning from going their own way and turning to go in the way of God.

And in verse 8, the prophet asks God to not only to forgive the people, but also to restore, renew, remake them. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”

Here the images of God as father and potter are helpful. Isaiah refers to God as “father” twice as the lament shifts from confession to plea. In contrast to the hidden God, the image of God as father and potter suggests closeness and personal connection. Yet neither image suggests a God who “would tear open the heavens.” Instead they call to mind a God whose mode of action looks more like that of the artist or the parent than that of the superhero. God forms and shapes the people as a father over time shapes the character of his children, as a potter lovingly molds her clay. Isaiah calls on Israel to be open to change in the hands of God, and he reminds God to fulfill the task of forming Israel into a people of blessing.

Bill Thomas shares a story about his friend, Dave, that adds to our understanding of this scripture and the nature of God:

His name is Dave. Dave is 6’6” tall and weighs about 250 pounds. He’s not overweight, he’s just a big, strong guy. Even though he’s in his late 40s, I’ve seen Dave single-handedly carry and load freight on a truck that would normally take two men to do. I’ve seen him in the gym where we live. The young

bucks there are always impressed with the weight Dave can lift and they marvel at his strength. Though I've never seen it, I've heard of how, in his younger days, he was a tough fighter and hardly anyone would ever oppose him. Dave's toughness and strength are evident to anyone who meets him.

What isn't quite as evident is the other side of Dave. I've seen him carry and comfort a crying infant. I've seen him hold the hand of the lost and fearful. I've seen him interact with his toddler grandson and tell him, without hesitation, that he loves him. Incredible strength and power combined with gentleness and love. If I had to describe Dave, that's what I would say.

I'd say that about God, too. The prophet Isaiah notes both of those traits in this passage. He and the people are longing for God's blessing again. God's power and strength are described here, as well as his anger about sin. Yet in verses eight and nine, there is a plea for the gentleness and love of the Father. To know God's power is to know his awesomeness. To know his love and gentleness is to know his heart. To know both is to know God.

In the season of Advent, Christians imaginatively enter a time of waiting for the Christ child, who comes as God hidden in human form, who comes not to bring about the beginning of the end-of-time cleansing, but to reveal the power of the powerless in his self-giving on the cross. In so doing, he reveals the will of the Father who is eternally, patiently molding and shaping the clay of creation into the New Jerusalem.

At Advent, God's people summon the courage and the spiritual strength to remember that the holy breaks into the daily. In tiny ways, we can open our broken hearts to the healing grace of God, who opens the way to peace. May that peace come upon us as a healing balm, as a mighty winter river, gushing and

rushing through the valleys of our prideful fear and our own self-righteous indignation. As a friend has said, this is not a season for passive waiting and watching. It is a season of wailing and weeping, of opening up our lives and our souls with active anticipation and renewed hope.

During our Christmas Eve service we are given an unlit candle and as individuals and the congregation we light our candles together. As we sing the last verse of Silent Night, we lift our candles high, a bright candle to carry in our darkened world, in order that we might burn brightly with the hope of the prophets and the courage of the gospel. The holy breaks into the ordinary, flooding us with hope for peace and making our hearts strong again, so that we can move into the world with courage and compassion.

And so we do not lose heart; rather, we live with our hearts broken open so that compassion, caring, and God's reckless love can find a way into our hearts and the heart of the world. Make straight in our hearts a highway for the possibility of peace.

The words of Isaiah remind us that God is and has been faithful. When we recall as this faith community how we see God's presence among us, we are amazed at how He has molded us in the same way the potter molds the clay. Recognizing God's presence is a daily task, especially given the world in which we live. God has been visible in our midst. Waiting with hope that God will be visible once again is the call of Isaiah to God. Watching with eyes to see is the call to Isaiah to the people of faith. To hear the voice of Isaiah is to proclaim that Advent is more than a time to hear promises about God. Advent become a season of attentiveness to the presence of God already among us. Emmanuel-God with us!