

Isaiah 64:1-9

First Sunday in Advent (Series B)

Lessons for the Day: Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Promises of Peace: Peace with God

November 29, 2020

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him. You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways. Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities. But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Well, it's official now. American Thanksgiving is over, Advent has begun, so Christmas is just around the corner. It's time to get ready, time to get out the Christmas decorations, to finish the shopping, to get cracking on that holiday baking. After all, one would have to be a total recluse not to recognize that something big is just around the corner, which for our world means the celebration of that thing called Xmas. Christmas is coming, the season is near, and you had better get ready.

But wait. This year we may feel, “what's the point?” After all, we really have no idea right now what our Christmas celebration is going to be like this year. Why put up decorations, if no one can come to our home for Christmas gatherings? Why do all the baking? Lord knows we don't need all those extra calories. Shopping isn't easy, with the restrictions in various places. We're less likely to have company, or to travel to be with others. Everything just seems so out of sorts this year!

Our lives are unsettled. Our world is in confusion. We are tired of COVID, tired of isolation, tired of restrictions. We are frustrated because of all the things that we want, but which can't be in these days. We want things to be different. We want something better. Thankfully, that is the very promise that comes to us in these Advent days. To a lost and dying world; to a world in turmoil, uncertainty and fear, the Lord of life and salvation brings His glorious hope. In His hope, we find peace for our lives and rest for our souls. We know that we are preparing for more than what the world thinks matters as Christmas. We are preparing a celebration of life and love and grace that is so much greater than all the problems of this world. We are looking to the coming of the Saviour, who brings the promise of real and lasting peace: peace with God, and peace for our lives.

Oh, how we long for peace in the midst of this unsettled world! Our text today is part of a dialogue between Isaiah and God. Isaiah sees the struggles of his world, just as we see the struggles of ours. His prayer is simple: *“Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and beautiful habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me.”* (Isaiah 63:15, ESV) That prayer leads to the prayer that begins our text today: *“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!* Yes, Lord, come in power and glory, because only You can fix the mess that we see in this world and in our lives!

In the musical, “Fiddler on the Roof”, there is a song entitled, “When Messiah Comes”. The song comes across as an apology from God for delaying his coming, especially when His people so desperately needed Him. But it also notes that when Messiah comes, everything is going to be all right. That is the hope that God's people have had since the fall

into sin. It was the hope of the people of Israel; it has been the hope of the church throughout the ages. It is also the one thing that we have that is sure and certain in the midst of this troubled world. Messiah comes, and brings perfect peace, the peace which passes all understanding.

But while we yearn for that peace, it isn't what we see in this world. It isn't just COVID; there are so many things in our lives and in our world that make us feel like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in his poem that we know as the carol, "*I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*". Longfellow wrote during the days of the US Civil War, and much of his original poem reflects this. We may just think of the words, "*And in despair I bowed my head; There is no peace on earth, " I said; For hate is strong, And mocks the song Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"*" I can't begin to tell you the number of things that seem to rob people of their peace in these days. Some have experienced the loss of loved ones. There are the medical tests and the uncertainty associated with them. There is the economy and the jobs that are lost. Yes, there is all that COVID stuff, too. How can we have peace when we are so overwhelmed with the craziness of life in this world?

Isaiah felt that way, too. The enemies of Israel were getting the best of them. Life was tough. Something needed to change. Is it any wonder, then, that the prophet prays for the Lord's coming and that He come soon to deliver His people? He says in our text: ***Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.*** Isaiah's prayer was that God would come and make His power known against all their enemies. If You will come with that great power, O Lord, then all the evil that is at work in this world will be powerless to stand against You. Then You will bring us that perfect peace, that peace which only You can give.

Isaiah knows what interferes with that peace; what lies behind all of the unrest that is in our world. It is the power that sin has over us. Sin is not just some sort of an abstract concept, something that affects the environment around us. It is something that is a great part of us. Isaiah says: ***You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways. Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.*** There is a division between us and the God of peace, a division that exists between our wickedness and His holiness. Like the children of Israel, we have heard His Word; we are aware of His commands. Yet we are content to go on doing things our way. We don't seek to be holy; we don't seek to listen to Him. We think: this is my life; I'll live the way I want to live. But sin and God's holiness are contrary to one another. They cannot abide together. There can be no peace in our world, no peace in our lives, where sin reigns.

Isaiah knew that sin destroyed the peace that God wants us to have, but He also knew that God was a merciful God, a God who saved and redeemed His people. We can never bring about the peace that we need. But Isaiah says: ***But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.*** Even though we are sinners, God loves us. He loves us more than we can ever imagine. There is another Gospel lesson that is often read on this day. It tells of the Saviour riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday amidst the shouts of: ***"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"*** (Mark 11:9, ESV) That lesson near the end of the earthly life of Christ is told as we prepare to celebrate the One who is born to be Immanuel—God with us. We know why Christ came into the city that day: He came to suffer and die for the sins of the whole world. He did rend the heavens and come down to answer that prayer of Hosanna: "save us, we pray". The answer to Isaiah's prayer and the way to true peace was through the cross, where the Lord of Life gave His life for sinners, including you and me. The answer is in the empty tomb, vacated when the Saviour rose again in victory. God has opened the heavens and come down, but not with the power that could melt the mountains, or in a fire that consumes all that lies before it. Rather He comes in the power of love and grace. He comes in the power of holiness and truth. He comes with the power to save and redeem His people.

It is because Christ is our peace, our Redeemer, and our Saviour that Paul can say: ***"you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our***

Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 1:7–8, ESV) Sin no longer controls us; rather, the love of Christ directs all we do. In Christ we have peace, even in the most unsettling moments of our lives. We have peace with God, and no matter what else may happen, that assures us that when the Lord shall come again, He will take us to be with Him in that perfect haven of peace and rest that lasts for all eternity.

In Christ, God has kept His promise of peace, and has restored us as His beloved children. He has come down to save us and to deliver us from our real enemies: from sin, death and the devil. And because of His promise we can be sure that ***“the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 4:7, ESV) Amen.