

Come Help Us God!

Isaiah 64:1-9; Advent 1; December 3, 2017

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Prayer: Almighty God, come among us again today. Never leave us or give up on us. Show your power to redeem us and the world. Set things right. O holy source of all our hopes, speak to us and rework us in your image. In Jesus' name. Amen.

When you're in a painful time in your life, how is your relationship with God? Have you ever felt as if God is silent, that God has forgotten you, or has turned God's back to you? Do you silently and privately pray to God for help? Are you down on your knees literally or metaphorically, in humble submission to God? Or do you get angry with God, shout at God or shake your fist at God?

The Israelites Plea for God's Help

In about 539 BCE here's how the prophet Isaiah addressed God at a desperate time in the life of the Jewish people. He cried out to God with a desperate plea: "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, and make the mountains shudder at your presence, and blaze like a forest on fire, and steam and bubble like a boiling hot pot- to shock your enemies into facing you, and make the nations shake in their boots!*" (Isa.64:1-2).

Isaiah's prayer is a demanding "get down here right this instant!" plea and these are vividly descriptive images of appeal- *tear open, mountains shudder, forest fire, boiling water*.

What's behind Isaiah's desperate plea? What's going *on* here? In 586 BCE, Jerusalem and Judah were conquered by the Babylonians, the Temple was destroyed, and the Jews were sent to live in exile in Babylon. It was *humiliating*. They had to live under foreign domination *again*. They were alienated from their homeland and the foreigners among whom they lived worshiped pagan gods. Even after the exile when they were allowed to return to Jerusalem, their life back in Judah was very harsh. There was economic oppression.

And as the Jews attempted to cope with life's problems, many of them reverted to the pagan rituals that God had warned them against through Moses. They were suffering for their sins, and they were estranged from God. They were living in a time of darkness.

As spokesperson for his Jewish people, the prophet Isaiah appealed to God. He implored God to demonstrate God's great power, and reveal God's glory to all nations, not just to the Jews. In so many words, Isaiah said, "Put your power and authority beyond *anyone's* doubts, God. You have acted this way in the past. You rattled and shook Mount Sinai with thunder and earthquakes when you came down and gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Do it *again* for your people, O God." Isaiah wanted God both to judge the evil nations and to bless God's people. It was a powerful plea for God to intervene in a decisive way to bring redemption to the people.

We Plea for God's Help

When have you felt such a desperate longing?
And what's on your plea-list to God right now?

If you were a family member of the nearly 3,000 people who were killed in the terrorist attacks on New York City, Washington and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, surely your plea to God would have been the same as Isaiah: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

And if you were a Rohingya person being subjected to ethnic cleansing by the government of Myanmar, forced out of your life-long home and into poverty and exile in Bangladesh, surely your plea to God would be the same as Isaiah: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

If you were a Syrian, African or any other refugee fleeing persecution, terrorism and war in your native country, surely your plea to God would be the same as Isaiah: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

And if you were a victim of harassment or abuse, suffering in silence because of feelings of humiliation and shame, surely your plea to God would be the same as Isaiah: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

If you were a person struggling with an addiction, and you felt as if you were at the end of your rope, at rock bottom, out of money, out of home, out of friends, out of options, surely your plea to God would be that of Isaiah: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

And if you were encumbered with a serious health problem for which healing seems illusive, surely your plea to God would be that of Isaiah: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

At what other situations do we cry out that God will display God’s power, and intervene, and redeem? We cry out to God for justice, freedom and security for minority groups and for the rights of children. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

We cry out to God for peace between the governments of North Korea and Iran and Syria, and the governments of the rest of the world: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” We cry out to God for a world without nuclear weapons, a world without violence, a world without greed, a world full of love, compassion, cooperation, equality and kindness.

On a *personal* level, what do you want God to shake up? In what area of your life do you want God to powerfully intervene, redeem and set right? “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

God’s Power and Grace Can Help the Israelites

Dive a bit deeper into the scripture and we notice that along with Isaiah’s plea for God’s help for the people, is his humble confession on behalf of the people. He acknowledges that Israel has sinned against God. Israel bears some

responsibility for its troubles and for alienating itself from God. In vivid imagery, Isaiah confesses to God that the people feel unclean, like a dirty garment fit to be thrown away. Like a withered leaf or wind-blown garbage, their sinful pursuits have destroyed the sanctity of life. Their behaviour is so bad that none of them is faithful to God.

But Isaiah and Israel have not given up or lost hope in God's mercy. For, in the pouring out of his heart to God in humble confession, this scripture is ultimately a prayer of confidence and trust in God. Isaiah says, "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" (Isa. 64:4). In other words, "We *believe* in you God. We believe that you can intervene. You can make life peaceable and joyous. You can completely transform us.

Then after his confession, Isaiah affirms the people's trust in God, by calling God "Father." He says, "Still, God, you are our Father. We're the clay and you're the potter. We're all the work of your hand" (Isa. 64:8). You can remake us God!

To be able to address God as Father is a claim to be children of God in spite of all the evidence. The Jewish people may feel as if they are merely clay, but it is their faith in God as Father which gives them hope. God will come to the people's aid because God loves them, like a father cares for his children. That is the urgent hope of Isaiah's prayer, a prayer which began in a desperate plea, and ends in acknowledgment of the people's intimacy with God.

God's Power and Grace Can Help Us

When we cry out to God for help, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!," God comes to *our* aid too.

So never lose hope. God *sees* your trouble when you're in a difficult time in your life, and God *understands* and *empathizes* with you. You're never alone. God does not abandon you. God *loves* you and *cares* about you. So much so, that God has come to us in the flesh, in Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ.

Christ comes to bring us the good news of God's unconditional love for us. He comes to mend broken hearts and lives. He comes to free those who feel oppressed. And he is coming again.

The Season of Advent calls us to watch and wait with hope, trust and confidence.

For God is a promise-keeper. Christ, the Light of the World is coming.

Wait. Hope. Trust.

Amen.