

¹O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

²as 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!

³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

⁴From 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.

⁵You 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.

⁶We 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.

⁷There 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.

⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

I did something a week ago that I never thought I'd do. I started to put up my exterior Christmas lights before Thanksgiving. The reason why I normally wouldn't do this is because I have always followed the rule of thumb that we should get through one holiday before we start celebrating the next one. But then 2020 hit. The pandemic -- the social unrest after the killing of George Floyd -- the west coast wildfires at a scale never-before-seen -- the barrage of hurricanes that hammered the Gulf Coast and Central America -- the economy -- the election year that still polarizes our country. The week following Labor Day was when I saw one of my neighbors first begin to set up Halloween decorations. Wait... that was nearly two months out! Yet, I understood. Collectively we need to find and offer some comfort. Something to temporarily take our mind off the world around us, and decorations can provide a bit of comfort and distraction.

So I started to roll out my holiday lights earlier than I normally would, just in the hope to bring some comfort to my neighbors... and to me, to speak frankly. All of us would like to have a Norman Rockwell version of the holidays, especially this year, even if such a depiction is something far from any of our past experiences of the holidays.

Here we are to worship just a few days after Thanksgiving, on this first Sunday of Advent, and this passage from Isaiah immediately confronts us. Truth be told, Isaiah is no Norman Rockwell. Although we might be disappointed that a comforting word through-and-through was not read, there is still reason to appreciate this passage.

Namely, we should appreciate that God's word meets us with the truth, not with sentimental tropes of good cheer that merely conceal the reality around us.

These words from Isaiah were aimed at a people who had lost everything in exile and have now returned to their homeland of Judah to find it in ruins. Not unlike communities along the west coast who have returned to the ruins left after a wildfire. Not unlike communities who witness the destruction of a hurricane. Not unlike every one of us who daily think about the many and various ways that life has changed in one year. Just past our reading, Isaiah quotes the Israelites as saying, "all that we treasured lies in ruins." We understand. They have a desire for God to set things straight once again. Return them to the way they were.

We easily overlook their response to this desire for God to return things to normal: they contemplate their sin. You likely picked up how Isaiah lays the blame for the ruins at the feet of the people because of their sin. We should note, however, that there were other contemporaneous prophets in scripture who looked at the same ruins and concluded "that's just life" -- don't lay the blame at the feet of the victims. Even today people theorize and dispute where blame lays during the calamities we witness. I won't get into all that now, but let it be known that just as there are many perspectives today about where fault lies, there were many perspectives all those centuries ago, and Isaiah's perspective was just one of many. Although the prophets may have disagreed on perspective, we shouldn't lose sight of what the people experienced. Life as they knew it was upturned, and they began to contemplate life, to contemplate their sins, and in verse 7 today we are told by Isaiah that the people reached the point that [quote] "There is no one who calls on [God's] name, or attempts to take hold of [God]." In other words, things weighed on the people so much that they had difficulty praying. They felt so estranged from God that it was difficult for them to put their hearts into the relationship. We've been there this year. I've been there this year. Perhaps we are still there, feeling disconnected somehow, having difficulty putting words to prayer.

Daily I give thanks to God for my family, my health, this congregation. Daily I pray that God would intercede for those I know who've been impacted the most this year. I try to enfold in prayer the numbers associated with the daily new cases, with the climbing death count, and with the increasing number of people who face the long-term effects of this illness. Like several of us here, I personally know someone who has died from COVID-19. But, to be honest, my mind has an increasing numbness to comprehend the numbers associated with this disease, and many days I fear my heart is numb as well. That's just how I am feeling with the pandemic. Then there are still the impacts of the racial injustices in our society, the impacts of climate change on communities, the impacts of a fallen economy on people I love, as well as the impacts of a nation that has some very deep rifts. All of it can be numbing. "There is no one who calls on [God's] name, or attempts to take hold of [God]," Isaiah says. We've been there; it sometimes feels like the relationship is estranged.

After saying those words, Isaiah makes a subtle shift: "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father." It is through that tiniest word that good news is offered: yet. This three-letter word perhaps is the best summary of the gospel. Humanity fell to sin, yet, O Lord, you are our Father. The people of God were enslaved in Egypt, yet, O Lord, you are our Father. All of humanity's hope died one Friday on a hill outside Jerusalem, yet, O Lord, you are our Father. Yet. We struggle, we even grow numb, yet God pulls through for us. In spite of our sin, and even in spite of any anger that God might have toward us, God is still on our side.

We are people who live in the promises of "Yet." That is especially true this year. We long for distraction and comfort from all that has taken place so far in 2020. Perhaps Christmas lights or a holiday movie will provide some of that, and that is fine. But don't confuse distraction and comfort for good news. Good news is grounded in truth, and the truth is that this year has been the worst. That can lead us to feel distant from God, distant from our neighbor, and distant from our faith community. Yet... God is still our Father. God remains faithful to us.

The Isaiah reading begins with, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The Hebrew word translated as "tear open" literally means to break down a door. The image here is like crime-fighting movies in which God busts down the door to catch the bad guys in the act and to rescue the captives. So this passage today from Isaiah tells us that God is faithful to us even before God busts down the door at the climax of the story. As people of faith we live in the "Yet." The Yet is living in a world that is far from perfect while also knowing that God is still faithful to us even while we wait for God to bust down the door at the climax of the story. In our gospel lesson, as the disciples live in the Yet, they are told to keep awake, to remain alert, and to stay on watch. Jesus describes the climatic door busting scene as just as certain to happen as a fig tree will bud leaves, and the door busting will be as unpredictably sudden as the return of a homeowner without warning.

So as people of faith, we watch, we wait, and we work. That is what living in the Yet looks like. Watching, waiting, and working as disciples in this world. God is with us, even when we feel so weighed down by events that surround us. God is faithful to us, despite any sin or failing on our part. And while Advent recalls the anticipation of Christ's first entrance in this world, the season also calls us to anticipate Christ's climatic second entrance at the end of this grand story. The hero will bust down the door, so we wait, we watch, and we work.

Amen.