

“Tear Open the Heavens”

Rev. Eric S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

November 29, 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9 (NRSV)

O 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.

There is a Hasidic story about a rabbi who crossed a village square every morning on his way to the temple to pray. One morning, a large Russian Cossack soldier, who happened to be in a vile mood, accosted him, saying, "Hey, rabbi, where are you going?"

The rabbi simply said, "I don't know."

This infuriated the soldier. "What do you mean, you don't know? Every morning for twenty-five years you have crossed the village square and gone to the temple to pray. Don't fool with me. Why are you telling me you don't know?" He grabbed the old rabbi by the coat and dragged him off to jail.

Just as the Cossack was about to push him into the cell, the rabbi turned to him, and softly said, "You see, I didn't know."

As we gather – but only across the Internet – for the beginning of this new Advent season, I imagine most of us can relate with that rabbi. We didn't know where we were going. How could we have known?

My calendar records a meeting that Pastor Matt and I, along with others here, participated in on Thursday, March 12th. It was called "Coronavirus Meeting and Q&A For Champaign-Urbana Clergy" and it was hosted by Julie Pryde, the Public Health Administrator for this area. Until that date, I had not heard of Julie Pryde, though 8 months later, her work is never far from my mind. In that meeting, Ms. Pryde, a wonderful public servant, filled us in on the emerging reality of this novel Coronavirus. By just a few hours later, your session had met in a called meeting, deciding to hold only online worship for the next *two* Sundays, in an attempt to stop the spread. We didn't know where we were going. That day was exactly one month prior to Easter, and I vividly recall

thinking the unthinkable – what if this lasts until Easter? What if we are not able to gather together physically on Easter Sunday?

And now, we've gathered together – across the Internet – through Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Easter Sunday, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, Ordinary Time, All Saints' Day, and Christ the King Sunday, bringing us to this new church year, which begins with Advent. And in Advent every year we talk about it being a time of preparation for the coming King. We say it is a time of waiting. This year, though, I imagine we all feel like we've done more than enough waiting! From those whose calendars emptied in March to those whose schedules only became more intense, from those who have barely left home to those who have done so only with many precautions, from those who are trying to make the best of a tough situation to those who have not had that luxury, we are tired of waiting. We didn't know where we were going.

Our scriptures show us that we are far from alone. In our reading this morning, the prophet Isaiah is speaking to God on behalf of the people of Israel. They had been captured by the Babylonian army and taken to Babylon to live. They longed to return to Jerusalem, but Jerusalem lay in ruins. Later in this passage, Isaiah says "Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation." They were tired of waiting for God to act, to restore Jerusalem. Isaiah speaks to God on their behalf, and he cries out in dramatic fashion, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!" Other translations put that first phrase a bit differently: "If only you would tear the heavens open and come down" or more directly, "Why don't you tear the sky open and come down?"

In other words, “God, get down here and *fix* this!” This is a cry of lament, a cry that many of us have made many times, perhaps particularly so during this pandemic. It is a cry of trust that God *can* make things better. The prophet notes in beautiful poetry: “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.” But there’s that word again: “wait.” The patience of the Israelites – along with ours – has run thin.

Then, Isaiah’s poetry takes a turn. He admits that the people have sinned, that at least some of this is their own fault. In our waiting, we must admit the same – we have grown impatient with restrictions and have not always followed the guidance that would keep us from spreading this virus. Isaiah says “We have all become like one who is unclean.” The people of God have sinned. We have all fallen short of the glory of God. We admit that we cannot fix this on our own. That is why we need God to tear open the heavens. And we want God to do that right now. Wait for the Lord? No, thank you.

Colleen Wessel-McCoy, a pastor in New York, says that her family loves advent calendars. Her young son always called it an “advent-er calendar,” rather than an “advent calendar.” She says she never corrected him because it was just too cute. She later realized that she liked the sound of “advent-er,” in that it changes the word “advent” into a verb.. An advent-er is someone who advents. She writes, “Advent is not passive waiting. It’s active anticipation. We are called to be advent-ers.”¹

Active anticipation. Our waiting is not simply biding time. It is not sitting on our hands. Our waiting is an active time of preparing. It is as Isaiah wrote elsewhere, “In the wilderness

¹ <https://kairoscenter.org/advent-revolutionary-patience/>

prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” We are crying out to God to tear open the heavens and come down, to set things right, and part of that call is getting ourselves ready.

This time of Advent each year is a time to prepare for the coming Messiah. We prepare with hearts willing to listen for the spirit of God, stirring deep within us. We prepare with lives lived in constant readiness for God’s call. We examine the lives that we have been living and then cast off that which is not pleasing to God, committing ourselves to new lives of love and service, for each other and for God.

And we don’t go it alone. After the verses of lament and confession, at the beginning of verse 8, Isaiah inserts a word which changes the tone. “*Yet,*” the prophet begins. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter, we are all the work of your hand.” Many of you will likely know the classic hymn “Have Thine Own Way, Lord,” though it’s not in our current or previous hymnal. “Have thine own way! Thou art the potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me after thy will, while I am waiting, yielded and still.” I love that old hymn, based on this text and on the story in Jeremiah 18. God is the potter and we are the clay. God molds and makes us. What I notice today about the last part of that verse, though, is “while I am waiting, yielded and still.” God molds and makes us, but first, there’s waiting, and we have to yield to God’s work in our lives. That, to me, is another aspect of our Advent preparation. We must let go of what gets in the way of God molding us into God’s will. We must put down our stubborn insistence that things must be done *our* way. The last verse of the hymn includes the line, “Fill with thy Spirit till all shall see Christ only, always, living in me!” When we allow God to mold us, then the world sees Christ in us. Those we encounter see us as vessels of Christ’s love, filled with God’s will, rather than

obstinately holding on to our selfish ways, regardless of how our actions affect others. Advent is a time of letting go, so that we can be filled with God.

In Advent each year, we are acutely aware of the already and not yet nature of our faith. Christ has already come down to earth. Isaiah's call for God to tear open the heavens has been answered in the coming of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago. And yet, we prepare each year for Christ's birth anew. We prepare our hearts and our sanctuary and our homes for the inbreaking kingdom of God to come again.

We're waiting for Jesus to be born again, to get down here and fix this! At the beginning of this calendar year, we didn't know where we were going. We're in a very different situation than any of us could have imagined, and we still don't know where we're going, really. We don't know how long this pandemic will last. We don't know how long we will gather remotely for worship. We see light at the end of the tunnel with the announcement of vaccines, but the way is still dark. We need the light of Christ to break through the darkness of our world, as we see in our advent candles, which remind us of the light coming into the world. We need God to throw us back on the potter's wheel, to make us new and beautiful again, so in this season of active anticipation, of being advent-ers, we pray "Have thine own will, Lord." Amen

Affirmation of Faith – *by Rev. Rebecca F. Harrison*

We are an Advent people,
a people of hope.

For us, Advent is a time of waiting,
and so we wait.
We wait for the coming of the One
who is the fulfillment of God's promise,
the fulfillment of hope,
the declaration that we have been redeemed.

Even so, we are not a naïve people.
We know that the world in which we live
will continue to be filled with pain and sorrow.
We know that hatred and violence will continue to exist.
We know that death and separation will continue to be a part of our lives.

But because we are an Advent people,
we know that none of these things will win in the end.

The Holy One is coming,
to make holy once again
all that was, is, and ever will be.

And in our waiting and our hoping,
we work and worship,
pray and play,
in all things hoping that peace, love and joy will reign
in our lives and in our world,
now and forever.