

“The God who Comes to Save”
Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Well, the season of Advent is upon us once again and if you're like me, you're already making plans for Christmas. This year, things are a little bit different in my house.

- Some of our Christmas decorations have been in place for three weeks.
- The wreath has been on the front door for a week.
- The tree is up and decorated.
- My outdoor lights are on, and I've got some neighbors who turned theirs on already.
- We've even started our Christmas shopping, which must be some kind of record since I usually don't start until December.

I don't know where you are in your Christmas preparations but if you're like me, Christmas can't come soon enough. With all that's gone on in the world this year, I'm feeling the words of that popular Christmas tune: “We need a little Christmas, right this very minute.” I'd even say we need a lot of Christmas. But Christmas is 26 days away and we have this season called Advent to get through first.

Advent is the start of the church year. Advent means “arrival”; it's a time of waiting, a time of preparing for the arrival of God. Which is kind of strange in one sense because, as we all know, God is already here, already present with us, already active in our lives. So what are we doing each Advent?

- We are to reflect on the meaning of Christ's birth for us, in all its deep meaning—what God did for us, for humankind, for all Creation in sending Jesus into the world.
- We use Advent to prepare for His arrival by looking into our own hearts. We won't like some of the things we find there.
- Which lead us to recognize the truth of what God has been saying through the prophets of Israel all along—we need a savior, because we cannot save ourselves.

That shouldn't surprise any of us given the state of the world. It becomes abundantly clear in today's reading from Isaiah in which we find—no surprise—Israel is in a bad way. Oppressed by outsiders, caught up in their own sins, turned away from God, Israel was a sorry sight indeed. And what's more, they knew they were in trouble of their own making. Listen to this from Isaiah:

“There 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” (Isaiah 64:7).

Israel felt abandoned by God. Left to their own devices, they turned away from God. They were losing their faith: “There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you.”

The people could not see, their ears could not hear, nor could their minds perceive that God was still there for them. So, they cried out to God; they pleaded with God to come to their rescue, now, right away; to come in some miraculous way, the way God had come to Israel before.

“Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence...” (Isaiah 64:1).

They wanted desperately to see their salvation coming for them.

Here's a story I really like because I think it captures the essence of what's going on in today's scripture lesson. It's told by Christopher Davis, a pastor and seminary professor in Memphis, Tennessee:

When my son, Christopher, was a boy, I took him to Toys-R-Us, and he got separated from me.

Christopher was my first child, so my fatherly instincts caused me to panic. I knew that he had not exited the building because I could see the doors. I paced up one corridor and down another, around a corridor, around another aisle, looking to find him amidst a crowd of people in the Christmas rush—but I could not find my son. I found a security guard and him: “Do you have a monitor?” “Yes.” “Can I look at the monitor?” “Yes.” “Can you scan the floor?” “Yes.”

The guard began to scan up and down the aisles, and there I saw my son, surrounded by toys, yet crying. He was clearly in a state of panic. My son was all by himself among people he did not know. My son was feeling lost and alone, and I did not know what to do. I asked the guard, “Do you have an intercom?” He said, “Yes.”

I said, “Keep the camera on him.” Then I got on the intercom and said, “Christopher.” My son looked around because he recognized my voice. I continued, “Stay where you are.” He started looking around. “It’s Daddy,” I said. “Don’t move. I see you although you can’t see me. Stay where you are. I’m coming.”

Davis observed of this incident in his life: “In those moments, when you think that God cannot see you or that you cannot see God, always remember that God sees you. The invisible hand of God is active and is looking after your life.”¹

The people of Israel were like Davis’ son. They called on God to help them, but they could not see God. They cried out for God to come into their lives in a dramatic, cloud-rending, earth-shattering, heart-stopping way, just the way God had done before in Israel’s history: at the Red Sea, at Mount Sinai, with manna in the desert wilderness, at Jericho, whose walls crumbled at the sound of the trumpets. They were confident God could do what they asked; that God would come to save them.

But God did not come. Not right away, and not the way they wanted. They had to wait for God to act in God’s time and in God’s way. Waiting for God is not the answer Israel, or we, want to hear. But waiting is what we must do.

Waiting for God has a long biblical tradition:

- “Wait for the Lord,” wrote the psalmist, “be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” (Psalm 27:14).
- “I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry” (Psalm 40:1).
- From today’s reading from Isaiah, recognition that the unseen God will come: “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**” (Isaiah 64:4).
- And in the reading from 1 Corinthians, where the Apostle Paul thanks God for the ways God has strengthened the Corinthian Christians “so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift **as you wait** for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:7).

It’s been said that God answers prayer in one of three ways: yes, no, and not yet. Waiting for God is waiting on the “not yet.”

- God gives to God’s people, but seldom in the way we want God to act.
- God did not come in the kind of power and might the people of Isaiah’s time wanted to see.
- Instead, God came in through the back door, as a poor peasant child. Humbly, and without widespread fanfare, Jesus came into the world.

This is how God finally “tore open the heavens and came down.”

And that brings us back to Advent. This is a season to wait, to watch, to prepare for the coming of God. It’s a time to survey our lives and our world, to open our hearts to the life-changing word of God that has come, that is coming, that will come again. Advent is our time to wait. And as we wait for the faithful God to come, let us think of the places in our world that need God’s saving grace. We can name some of them:

- An end to the pandemic and the great loss of life it has caused over the past 9 months.
- An end to political rancor and a turn toward cooperative problem solving—in our nation and in the world—on issues like climate change, war, hunger, and poverty.
- An end to racism that leads to changed hearts, so that everyone sees the value of all people because all people are made in the image of God.
- An end to addiction, human trafficking, and other forms of exploitation that enslave and dehumanize the most vulnerable people.

I’m sure there are other things we could add to this list. Maybe there are some things that are personal for all of us where we need for God to “come down.” Whatever those things are, wherever they are in our lives, know that we are not alone.

- God loves us, deeply.

¹ Christopher Davis, “Commentary on Isaiah 64:1-9,” Working Preacher.org, November 29, 2020, article on internet, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-isaiah-641-9-5>, accessed 24 November 2020.

- God cares for us, passionately.
- God is with us, always.

In Advent, we remember the God who came to us long ago in Jesus, the God who is with us now in God's Holy Spirit, and the God who will come again. May we live this Advent with open hearts to allow God, the great potter, to shape our lives into the people God needs us to be. And while we wait, keep on showing signs of love to one another as an expression of God's love for each and every person.

Get your hopes up!

God is coming!

In the name of Jesus. Amen.