

“Advent Begins with Lament”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Isaiah 64:1-9
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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I grew up in church, but I did not grow up following the church calendar. Now that I do observe the church seasons, I still find myself shocked all over again each year at the beginning of Advent. Because in contrast to the cultural countdown to Christmas, the church season is somber, sometimes dreary, and in many cases downright desperate.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! so begins our Scripture reading for today, a passage which is written as a communal lament. The people collectively bemoan God’s seeming absence: “You have hidden your face from us,” and they passionately beg for an appearance. *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!*

There are no jingle bells here. No drummers drumming, no pipers piping, no lords a leaping, ladies dancing, or maids a milking. The days of Advent are marked by prayer and longing, by watching and waiting. Day one begins with lament.

“Where are you, God?!” is the opening song of Advent, followed by, “We really need you. We really, really need you.” *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!*

For the Israelite community in Isaiah 64, this litany of longing is not some abstraction. It’s situated in their very real experience. This is the prayer of God’s people after they return from Babylonian exile only to find their former home ruined, the temple in shambles. This prayer we read today may have been part of the liturgy they used while literally standing together on top of the temple ruins. They have lost so much. And now they pray, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake in your presence as when fire kindles brushwood.”

Again, not an abstraction. It is part of their communal memory that God showed up like a pillar of fire in the wilderness, like a bush on fire to Moses. Their whole lives long they’ve heard stories of God appearing at Mount Sinai and the earth quaking at God’s presence. They recall these memories aloud—“When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down. The mountains quaked at your presence.” And they wonder, if it happened back then, why not now? If God paid attention to us back then, why not now? If God intervened in human affairs and came to the rescue of those who suffered back then, why not now?

This is the longing with which Advent begins, and for us it is not an abstraction. Their prayers are our prayers, albeit among different circumstances. When you and I enter the season of Advent, it is not as if the story is new to us. We’ve heard it before—God leaving the heavens and coming down to us in the unexpected form of a baby—not exactly mountain-shaking material but earth-shattering in its own way all the same. And yet, each Advent season we are deeply aware that there are corners of the world and pockets of our lives where God has almost certainly

hidden God's face. We stare in horror at yet another episode of violence or read another headline or walk away from yet another fight with a loved one or face one more bout of depression, and we wonder, if God paid attention back then, why not now? If God intervened in human affairs and came to the rescue of those who suffered back then, why not now? Why not for children? Why not for the poor? Why not for me?

Isaiah's lament is a little unusual in that the community both admits culpability—"We are all unclean"—and blames God—"Because you hid, we transgressed." So, is it the chicken or the egg? Did they sin because God went away or did God go away because they sinned? Most biblical laments are either confessions—"Forgive us, for we have sinned," or they are protests—"God, you promised! Keep your promises!" But this lament is both. The liturgist feels no need to clarify whether the heart of the issue is our sin or God's apathy, because to this writer, it's all a problem, and if we're going to get to busy course correcting, then God better do the same.

Advent marks for us not just the weeks leading up to Christmas but also the start of a new church year. In the church calendar, today is New Year's and in the church new year you do not so much start with resolutions as with confessions and petitions. It is not a declaration of our willpower to change but a cry of our brokenness and our need.

When I think about this past year in our society I honestly couldn't be more ready for a new one to start. It's been one year since we elected a deeply immoral man to the highest office in our country. It's been another year of violence, mass shootings, brutality against people of color, the subtle and not-so-subtle defense of racism, and the overt rise of white supremacy. It's been a year of terrorism, global warming, cutthroat politics and family splintering. A year of more domestic violence, child abuse, teen homelessness, and oh yeah, let's not forget, the looming threat of nuclear war. It's been a year of rampant dishonesty and disregard for integrity. A year of unchecked bullying—from our schoolyards to our public offices. It's been a year of loss, of division, of hatred and fear.

That is not to say it's all been bad. Babies have been born. Flowers have bloomed. Friendships have formed. Victims of sexual violence are, in some places, finally being believed. But if ever in our recent history was there a year to begin Advent with confession and petition, it is now.

O God, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, for we have sinned and the world is messed up because of it. We have failed to take care of our planet and we have failed to truly listen to the voices of women, of people of color, the poor, the gay, the immigrant. Instead we have listened to the liars and manipulators, the rich and the powerful, the privileged and the blindly arrogant, the fraudulent voices who claim to speak for God but show nothing of Christ's compassion.

This world we live in is a hot mess, and as much as we'd like to blame someone else—the media or the undocumented or the NRA or the politicians—we know that this mess exists at least in part because of us. We know so because the mess is not new. This mess is not new. The current climate just exposes what we have done so well at covering up for so long. This year didn't so much start problems as pull away the curtain and reveal them, and gosh, is that uncomfortable.

We do not like the feeling of guilt or culpability, O God. It fills us with fear. What if we have messed up when all we ever wanted to do was get it right? What if there are changes we need to make when we've spent so much energy pointing out the changes *they* need to make? What if you have been calling us to transformation too and we haven't been listening?

O God, help us not to be so afraid of change. If you really do rip open the heavens and come down, we will tremble and we will shake like leaves in the wind but we will accept the challenge. We know we will be okay if you rip us open and take a look at our innermost selves. We will be okay not because we are free of racism and sexism and classism and ignorance and unexamined prejudice. We will be okay because we are your children and somehow you love us despite all these flaws and mess-ups and blind spots. We will be okay because we are like clay in a potter's hands—meaning it is never too late. You can still shape us and mold us again and again and that is gospel, good news in a time like this when our flaws are exposed in excruciating detail. This is hopeful news because it means the story is not over and God is not gone and our capacity to grow has not ended.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down. Where are you, God?! We really need you. We really, really need you.

Come as an earthquake, come as a whisper, come as a fire, come as a baby, come as the sound of a sheer silence or the cry of an infant, come whatever way you like, just come. We will try to be ready for you. And if you peel back the corner of heaven, peer down and see that we are still not ready, rip through those clouds and come anyway. Leave us not to our own devices. In the name of Jesus, baby Jesus, please come. Amen.