

The God Who Visits
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 1:9-11
1st Sunday in Advent, November 29, 2020

We are in the beginning of the holidays, and it certainly is a strange one. I am sure many of you were not able to be with family and friends like you normally do for Thanksgiving. I know many people spent the day alone. Many of you were disappointed when we had to cancel our church's Thanksgiving meal.

Most of you (I think) obeyed the advice to stay home. I remember one expert on a certain news station said, "Don't see your family this year, so you can see them next year." In other words, protect your family by staying apart. Do not visit each other.

And, it was hard. We missed visiting our loved ones, didn't we? I am sure many of you made phone calls or Zoomed or FaceTimed or Skyped. But it is not the same. We missed touching a face, hugging, laughing, crying together. We want it back. We want things to be the way they used to be.

This is the emotional, psychological and spiritual context of the Isaiah scripture passage I am about to read. The glory of Israel has long faded. The Hebrew people are in exile; they are not together. Worshipping in the temple is a faint memory.

Before I read, let us pray.

Prayer: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen.

Isaiah 64:1-9 (New Living Translation)

Oh, that you would burst from the heavens and come down!

How the mountains would quake in your presence!

²As fire causes wood to burn

and water to boil,

your coming would make the nations tremble.

Then your enemies would learn the reason for your fame!
³When you came down long ago,
you did awesome deeds beyond our highest expectations.
And oh, how the mountains quaked!
⁴For since the world began,
no ear has heard
and no eye has seen a God like you,
who works for those who wait for him!
⁵You welcome those who gladly do good,
who follow godly ways.
But you have been very angry with us,
for we are not godly.
We are constant sinners;
how can people like us be saved?
⁶We are all infected and impure with sin.
When we display our righteous deeds,
they are nothing but filthy rags.
Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall,
and our sins sweep us away like the wind.
And yet, O Lord, you are our Father.
We are the clay, and you are the potter.
We all are formed by your hand.
⁹Don't be so angry with us, Lord.
Please don't remember our sins forever.
Look at us, we pray,
and see that we are all your people.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The Israelites had messed up. They rebelled against God. They neglected religious observances. Their leaders set up false idols. They neglected the poor. They did not listen to the prophets, those who spoke for God. So, Isaiah admits to God in our passage: "We are all infected and impure with sin...You have turned away from us, and turned us over to our sins." They feel like they are in some kind of quarantine.

I zoomed with several good friends a week ago. One of them lives in Ohio; the other in Minnesota. I hadn't seen them in a long time. After we caught up with each of our lives, the conversation turned towards the pandemic. One of my friends said, "I am so disappointed. I was hoping that people would turn to God during this pandemic. But I don't see any evidence of it." She agreed with Isaiah in our passage, "No one calls on your name or pleads with you for mercy."

Now, while in captivity, the Hebrews begin to remember the glory of their past. They remembered how God had intervened on their behalf over and over again. "When you came down long ago, you did awesome deeds beyond our highest expectations."

When you came down. In fact, our passage begins with that cry, "Oh, that you would burst from the heavens and come down!" We want a visit.

Israel remembers the God who used to visit. It started at the very beginning in the Garden. God would visit with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening. These visits go on in scripture:

- God visited Abraham in the guise of angels who sat down for a meal.
- God visited Jacob, wrestling with him in the night.
- God visited Moses in the burning bush and on the mountain.
- God's presence went with the Israelites through the wilderness in the form of fire and cloud.
- God visited Samuel as a boy, calling him in his sleeping hours.
- God visited Elijah in a still small voice.

This is why the prophet calls out to God "Oh, that you would come down..." Again! He knows it is in God's nature to visit us. The prophet is saying, "Hey, you used to visit us a lot. What gives? Why aren't you coming around anymore? Please come for a visit — soon!"

Well, a promise was given to Isaiah (chapter 7). God will visit again. "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel." Which means "God is with us."

This is the first Sunday of Advent. In Advent, we know God is coming for a visit!

Take a look again at that first verse of Isaiah: “Oh, that you would burst from the heavens and come down!

We now turn to our second scripture passage: Matthew 3 – the baptism of Jesus.

¹³ Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to talk him out of it. “I am the one who needs to be baptized by you,” he said, “so why are you coming to me?”

¹⁵ But Jesus said, “It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires” So John agreed to baptize him.

¹⁶ After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.”

Did you see it?! As Jesus emerges from the water, the heavens burst open and Spirit of God descends (or, comes down) like a dove. I wonder how many who witnessed Jesus’ baptism remembered the cry of Isaiah...oh, that you would tear the heavens and come down.

Isaiah’s prayer is finally answered. God came down in a person of a carpenter’s son from Nazareth.

The God who visits.

A pastor tells the story of taking his son, to Toys-R-Us when his son was young. Somehow as they shopped, the son was separated from this father. The father paced up one corridor and down another... around a corridor... around another aisle... peeping... looking to find him amidst a crowd of people in the Christmas rush – but could not find his son.

The father found a security guard and asked him, "Do you have surveillance in the store?" He said, "Yes." The father asked, "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 the father saw his son, surrounded by toys, yet crying. The boy was clearly in a state of panic. The father said, "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."

The father continues with his story: "In those moments, when you think that God cannot see you or that you cannot see God, always remember that God sees you."

The God who visits.

Frederick Buechner says, "Jesus is apt to come, into the very midst of life ... at supper time, or walking along a road ... He never approached from on high, but always in the midst, in the midst of people, in the midst of real life...."

The God who visits.

George Washington Carver, who was a botanist and educator said, "I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting system, through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in."

I remember a day I tuned in. I went on a 9 day-biking trip with about 15 other people along what we Minnesotans call the North Shore on Lake Superior. We started in Duluth and biked along the shore of Lake Superior up to Canada and back again to Duluth. We camped every night; a sag wagon carried our gear.

One day, I decided to bike alone instead of with my group. As I was biking along, I saw a sign that said “Father Baraga’s cross” and pointed to a road that headed toward the lake. Father Baraga’s cross was erected in 1846 when he encountered a terrible storm while trying to reach an island in a small boat. He was blown onto a sand bar along the shore, and erected a cross in thankfulness.

I got off my bike and walked the trail to the cross. It was a nice cross. It wasn’t the original; it had been replaced by a granite cross. I looked at the cross and didn’t feel much of anything, so I kept walking until I reached the shoreline of Lake Superior.

I sat down on the rocks (they were nice and warm from the sun) and watched the water gently lap against the shoreline. I was disappointed that the cross didn’t do much for me, so I asked God, “Where are you?” And as I waited, suddenly, God was there. God was in the lake, the rocks, the warm sun, the trees, the birds. God was everywhere. I was stunned at the strong presence of God that day. An extraordinary visit of God.

The God who visits.

Let’s go back to the Zoom call I had with my 2 friends last weekend. Remember my friend’s comment of her disappointment that people weren’t turning to God during this pandemic. I told her that I fully believed that God was working in people’s lives. We don’t hear about it on the news, but God is in the midst of us, drawing people to himself. We don’t know about it because we are not near people these days. But God is visiting people all over the world

For it is in His name: Emmanuel! God with us.

- God with us throughout shelter-in-place and stay-at-home orders.
- God with us throughout quarantine.
- God with us throughout social distancing.

The God who visits.

The lamenting of Isaiah in our scripture passage ends in hope as most laments do. After his complaint, he says “And yet, Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter. We are all formed by your hand.”

God wants to mold us into that image that was breathed into us in the beginning of creation.

But what is even more amazing is that God molded God’s self on that Christmas Day into an impoverished, displaced, helpless infant. On that day, God became the clay to visit us. That is how much we are loved, and God is still in the business of visiting people today.

Come down, O Lord, and mold us today.

May you experience the fullness of God’s presence (or visit) each day.

Children's moment

We just had the season of Thanksgiving. What color do you think of when you think of Thanksgiving.

We are coming up on the season of Christmas. When you think of Christmas, what color do you think of?

Well in the church, we have seasons and special days, too. And each season and special day has a color. You can see that color in my stole and what is hanging from the pulpit. What color do you see now?

This was the color last Sunday. It was called Christ the King Sunday, and the color was white.

We are now changing seasons in the church to a season called Advent. Advent is the 4 weeks before Christmas. And Advent prepares us for Christmas when we celebrate the birth day of Jesus.

What color do you think Advent is?

It is purple; you can also say royal blue. (I take off my white stole and put on purple.) I am going to take off the white color on the pulpit and put on the purple/blue. We will keep these up for 4 weeks until Christmas.

So, when it comes time for us to come back to church, notice the colors on my stole, on the pulpit, and even when the choir comes back, they will wear the same colors, too. And see if you can guess what season it is in the church.