

But Now, O Lord

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: December 3, 2023

Readings

Isaiah 64:1–9a

Psalm 80 or 80:1–7

I Corinthians 1:1–9

Mark 13:24–37

Opening

If we're honest with ourselves, Christians have a strange sense of timing. Here we are on the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of December, the final month of the annual calendar, yet for Christians this is the first day of a new year. And at the beginning of the Christian year, our focus is not on beginnings, but on last things—the end of human history. When radio stations cue up Andy Williams's 'It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year' (a favorite of mine, no less!), the Church cues up the prophets. We turn the volume up on the prophets to listen more closely to the themes of repentance, of exile, of longing for Messiah's coming. It's a strange sense of timing. And yet the Church says to us today: it's time—this is how we begin. It is the time, it is the season to listen to Isaiah and John the Baptist and most importantly, our Lord Jesus.

To begin this Advent, I want us to turn our attention to the cry of the prophet, Isaiah. So I invite you to turn again with me to Isaiah 64 on page ### of your pew Bible. The first word of Scripture we hear in Advent is the Isaiah's cry, 'Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down.' It is a cry that comes from the void. This is the sound of a man, speaking for himself, speaking for his people, who cannot make sense of the world, who cannot make sense of what has happened to them. This is the prophet crying out in visceral lamentation.

A Time for Lamentation

Isaiah's lament doesn't begin here. His lament is longer. Isaiah's lamentation begins in verse 15 of chapter 63. He begins his complaint saying: 'Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and beautiful habitation. Where are your zeal and your might?' /

It's a strange way to begin the year. When you cue up the prophets, we hear Isaiah crying out in the middle of his confusion. The urgency of Isaiah's cry, the present pain he bears stems from the fact that he knows God's faithfulness. 'You, O Lord, are our Father,' he cries, 'our Redeemer from of old is your name.' We know your covenant promises are not void, but now we are standing in the void. We have

known your deliverance in times past, not only for our fathers and mothers, not only in the Exodus from Egypt, but we ourselves are eyewitnesses of your great deliverance. We have our own stories of your saving power. But that was then. And now the worst has happened; things we thought impossible have now come upon us.

Yes, Advent begins here—in the void, with lamentation. Prayers of lamentation in Advent aren't merely allowed, they're promoted, encouraged. Isaiah has the courage to do what most of southerners are unwilling to do—he prays without a filter. His prayer is visceral, raw. He's not pretending that life is better than it really is. Like his father Jacob, Isaiah wrestles with God. He's God man, God's prophet, God's voice to his people, yet Isaiah prays, 'Where are you?'

Lament is not only a prayer to God when you live in a world gone terribly wrong. Lament is living with the memory of God's goodness in the past, having that experience yourself, and *then* living in a world, in a life where the worst has happened. The pain comes from the discord, from living in between times—between the memory of God's deliverance and healing *back then*, and when you need him in a new crisis, perhaps one that is greater than before, God hasn't come *now*. 'Where are your zeal and your might?' 'Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down.' 'Tis the season for lamentation.

A Time for Questions

Advent is a season that begins with questions, too. Questions are not suppressed. Questions are prayed—brave, bold questions ascend to heaven as Advent begins. From Psalm 80: 'O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?' The psalmist remembers God saving Israel from Egypt, then planting Israel like a vine in a land flowing with milk and honey. But now the worst has happened. And when the worst has happened, questions become prayer: 'Why then have you broken down its walls so that who pass along the way pluck its fruit?'¹

Isaiah echoes the psalmist's question, and puts his visceral question at heaven's door. 'Your holy people held possession for a little while; our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary...shall we saved?'²

Remember who's asking the question here. Remember his story. Isaiah was in the temple in the year that King Uzziah died and suddenly, in that holy sanctuary, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. He saw seraphim around the throne, saying to one another 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' And now *that* sanctuary, where Isaiah witnessed God's awesome holiness and power; where the prophet received his calling to proclaim the Word of the Lord to his people—that sanctuary has been trampled down. The worst has happened. Babylon conquered Israel, burned down the Temple, took away her captives in exile. After the worst has happened, where are you? Shall we be saved?

Advent is a season that begins with questions uttered from the void, questions prayed from the place where we are bereft of any answers. Yesterday's wisdom has carried us thus far, but it has reached its limit—our knowledge cannot illuminate today's confusion.

¹ Psalm 80.12

² Isaiah 63.18, 64.5

Lord Jesus, you taught us that ‘concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.’³ Well, every day we pray ‘O God make speed to save us, O Lord make haste us to help us.’ And in this vale of sorrows and questions, we pray you would speed your return. For we have run out of answers living between the time of your first Advent and your promised return. We behold your world descending into more and more violence—from racial killings and mass shootings in our own land to devastating wars in distant lands. The war in Ukraine rages on. In the lands where Isaiah once prophesied and promised peace, innocent women, men, and children are suffering and dying. Churches have been destroyed. Have mercy on your people living between the times. We pray our question between the times—how long, O Lord? O God, make speed to save us.

A Time for Confession

With our questions we also bring our confession. For Advent is a season that begins with confession, too. For Isaiah, there is no complaint, no question, without *confession*. We need a prophet to teach us how to ask our deepest questions. And Isaiah teaches us that *our questions and our confession go together*. Our lament cannot be solely how the world has gone wrong, how the worst has happened; our lament must also be what has gone wrong within us.

We might hear Isaiah’s lament in paraphrase: ‘Before your enemies trampled your sanctuary, *we* defiled your temple with our so-called righteous deeds, which were like an unclean garment.’ Abraham Heschel had these verses in mind when he spoke about a reality he called *disguised polytheism*. Disguised polytheism is one who ‘combines the worship of God with his own (personal) gain.’⁴ In other words, we make the worship of God about ourselves, rather than an offering for God for his own sake. As Heschel said, ‘if in performing an (act of worship) one’s intention is to please a human being whom he fears or from whom he hopes to receive benefit, then it is not God whom he worships but a human being.’⁵ Oh, Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy. It is not the world alone that has gone wrong. It is we ourselves, even our pursuit of you. ‘We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.’

Oh, we want you to rend the heavens and come down and put this world to rights, but really you need to put us to rights first.

We need you to wake us up. You have taught us, Lord, to stay awake in this time of exile, while we await your return. But in the long wait for your return, we fail to see that this exile is exile. We are not home yet. And in that long waiting for our true home, we must confess with the poet Anne Porter,

We have got used to exile

We hardly notice

Our captivity

There are such comforts here

*Such luxuries.*⁶

³ Mark 13.32

⁴ Abraham Heschel, *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 392.

⁶ Anne Porter, “After Psalm 137”

O God, make speed to save us, O Lord make haste to help us. Not just your world, but us.

A Time for the Potter

If we left it there, we wouldn't be here. For in the weight of these Advent words, we must remember that Advent is a season of the greatest hope. After the worst has happened, after all our questions, after our confession, we have not reached the end. No, we actually have come to the beginning.

Most of all, Advent begins with these words: 'But now.' Verse 8: 'But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.' Advent is a season where we become clay for the potter's hand again—pliable, moldable in the shape he has envisioned for us.

It is no detached artisan who forms us. The potter is our Father. When we bring our deepest pain, we pray in lament to *our Father*. When we are haunted by questions we cannot answer, we bring them to *our Father*. When we locate the depth of our rebellion and our sin, we confess to *our Father*. In the great love of God, he does not discard us. No, in the mystery of God, he takes our repentance and molds us in the image for which we were made.

And how will our Father do this? How will God mold us into his image again? Through our prayers and lamentations? Yes. Through our questions and confessions? Yes. But these are not the image in which we were made.

For the Father to fashion us on the potter's wheel, we must be formed into the image of his Son. That is why, according to Hebrews, 'When Christ came into the world, he said,

"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a *body have you prepared for me.*"⁷This will be the salvation of a world gone terribly wrong and all that's gone wrong in ourselves; when God fashions a body for his only-begotten Son in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

In ourselves, we cannot stay awake; we are too weak. In ourselves, our questions would crush us in despair. In our most heartfelt confession, we're still tainted with self-interest. Well, thanks be to God that God fashioned a body of clay for himself, a body just like our own. Thanks be to God that Christ, who knew no sin, was baptized in the body. For we who are baptized in Christ, these bodies and souls can become clay in the potter's hands again—pliable, moldable, to form the image the Maker had in mind. And what is that image? The image of his Son—Jesus Christ! That's the good news at the beginning of this Advent.

And I think they've become my favorite words of the Advent season—But now! But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand. That's how you will restore us again; that's how you will restore your broken world—by conforming all things once again to the image of your Son. That is the great Gospel of your kingdom, that after the worst has happened, both we and your world are destined to be conformed to the image of your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, unto ages of ages. Amen.

⁷ Hebrews 10.5