

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as 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!

Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.

Ummmm...perhaps not what we were looking forward to just a couple days after Thanksgiving filled with mirth, and family and the sights and smells of the holidays. Or maybe, depending upon your in-laws and extended families you were thinking to yourself more than once “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that I wouldn’t have to hear this inane story from Uncle Sid about how he grew the world’s largest rutabaga one more time; get one more piece of advice from my mom about my love life; be present for Aunt Rose’ recitation of all the reasons why “That’s certainly one way to raise your children...but have you considered?”

So, for those of you who had a warm, loving and well-adjusted holiday this sermon may take a little more imagination. For those of you who identify with the latter experience of the holiday, well you’re already on the same page with Isaiah and ready for the first Sunday in Advent, a time more filled with darkness and despair than light and hope.

The irony of Advent is that we get caught up in the waiting, but all too often it’s not the waiting upon the Lord. Right? We have agendas for the holidays that require lots of preparation, lots of time. Maybe that’s why National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation is now a holiday classic. The madcap chronicles of the Griswold family, spurred by the patriarch Clark Griswold’s burning desire to give everyone in the family a “good old-fashioned family Christmas” goes horribly awry in an escalating series of misadventures involving road rage while caroling, exploding Christmas trees, and a S.W.A.T. team storming the Griswold home. We can all laugh

Isaiah 64:1-9

at Chevy Chase in this movie because, well, we can acknowledge that it's easy to get caught up in all the stuff that goes along with the holidays. We recognize a little bit of ourselves in Clark's missteps. That's what makes comedy funny, right? Seeing tragic mistakes made in painfully obvious fashion? It's easy to get caught up in the need to send out Christmas cards, visit all the family members, host a good Christmas party, get just the right gifts for our loved ones, put the Christmas decorations up which means lights and a tree, probably some caroling, and how about the baking because the holidays just don't seem right without the warm smell of fresh gingerbread cookies, there's just so many needs..or are they wants, sometimes it's kind of hard to tell. I'm not being coy here. I have as hard a time as the next guy keeping the needs and the wants in perspective, differentiating. It's at these times that I am thankful to have the words of others to help prompt and correct, or reorient my perspective; help me not miss the forest for the trees, as it were.

The Advent devotionals the church has made available this year include a piece from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Perhaps some of you will recognize his name in connection with various significant works of practical theology like "The Cost of Discipleship" or "Life Together". Others may know of his lengthy imprisonment in a series of SS prisons in Nazi Germany for his stance against the Third Reich and its usurpment of the official church. This unswerving conviction and its continued communication led to his execution at Flossenburg Concentration Camp in the last days of the war. Throughout these uncertain years Bonhoeffer voices his experience of waiting and hoping,

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as 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! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 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. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we

Isaiah 64:1-9

sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We 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.

Listen as Bonhoeffer reflects on this to a family member serving in the German army:

‘I so much want to spend a quiet Sunday morning talking things over with you, and I am so tempted by the thought that a letter like this might help you to pass a quiet solitary hour, that I will write to you, though I don’t know whether, or how, or where this will reach you.. How and where will the two of us be keeping Christmas this time? I hope you will manage to communicate something of its joy.. to your fellow soldiers. For the calmness and joy with which we meet what is laid on us are as infectious as the terror that I see among the people here at each new attack. Indeed, I think such an attitude gives one the greatest authority, provided that it is genuine and natural, and not merely for show. People need some constant factor to guide them. We are neither of us daredevils, but that has nothing to do with the courage that comes from the grace of God.’

What is he talking about? The ‘calmness and joy with which we meet what is laid on us are as infectious as the terror I see among the people here at each new air-raid attack’? We’re looking at a man who is doomed either way. Either the Allied bombings will get him or the SS will hang him for treason. And yet that doesn’t occupy his focus while he waits. Rather he’s working through a larger picture, something beyond his own life, thinking like 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.

Apt words to describe the last days of the Reich.

Isaiah 64:1-9

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people. Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.

Listen as Bonhoeffer continues:

“My thoughts and feelings seem to be getting more and more like those of the Old Testament, and in recent months I have been reading the Old Testament much more than the New. It is only when one knows the unutterability of the name of God that one can utter the name of Jesus Christ; it is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything seems to be over that one can believe in the resurrection and a new world; it is only when one submits to God’s law that one can speak of grace; and it is only when God’s wrath and vengeance are hanging as grim realities over the heads of one’s enemies that something of what it means to love and forgive them can touch our hearts.”

My sense is that Bonhoeffer has it just right.. to fully comprehend the gift of Christmas, we have to understand our tragic missteps in the world and bow before the Lord in humility. The Advent candles we light reflect this. The three dark blue candles represent the watches of the night, the time when we like the people of ancient Israel may well wonder at our mistakes, at our profound and comic sins, at the gravity of our loss and grief – wondering how do we maintain hope in the face of this? How can such ridiculous creatures as ourselves hope to be reconciled to perfection, to the Author of goodness and light? And ridiculous is us at our best right? At our worst we are not simply buffoons like the Three Stooges or Jerry Lewis, but something much worse, destructive on a grand and profane scale: Hitler,

Isaiah 64:1-9

Stalin, Mao, Pinochet, Dahmler, and the BTK serial murderer. After all, we put Christ to death, what worse is there than that?

And yet..and yet..the Lord keeps his promises. The pink candle, the first paint of morning on the Eastern horizon. As the psalmist says ‘I rely, my whole being relies Yahweh, on your promise. My whole being hopes in the Lord, more than watchmen for daybreak; more than watchmen for daybreak let Israel hope in Yahweh.’”

Now am I, or is Isaiah, or the psalmist suggesting that we spend the time leading up to Christmas day as quivering, guilty and miserable wretches hunched before the Lord in penitence like pathetic Ebenezer Scrooge in the graveyard, begging for another chance? Hardly, just as Scrooge needed a jolting epiphany to change his celebration of Christmas, of life, so it is with us. For as Isaiah says elsewhere, “those that wait upon the Lord will regain their strength, they will mount up on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, walk and never tire.”

Advent. Advent. Advent of what? The annual rebirth and glorification of our own misguided desires and regrets – or of something else, something wonderful and awful all at once? Comic or epic? Mundane or transcendent? We are waiting, help us in our waiting Lord. Amen.