

# **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

## **Advent I**

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**Isaiah 54:1-9**

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Advent is about looking for God. In worship, we look forward to the coming of Jesus to Bethlehem, which is a little strange if you aren't used to it because historically he has already come. But the liturgy transports us back to the time before he came such that we exercise the spiritual muscles of anticipation and waiting, so that we can practice that thing that the adult Jesus talks about again and again: "Watch. Stay awake." So that's why at this time of year you can go to live nativity scenes and Christmas plays where people dress up like first-century Palestinians and act out the circumstances immediately prior to Jesus' birth. But Advent is not primarily a historical movement to be recreated by forced imagination. It's an inward movement such that the watching and waiting, the anticipation and hope that lies dormant in us is stirred again.

From the beginning of time humans have had this inner desire to find and connect with something larger than themselves. Even the caveman, back there taking up his spear to leave the cave and go get some meat believed that somehow whether or not he came home with dinner was a function of the god of the hunt. So he would burn a bit of the catch in thanksgiving if he was successful or he would offer some other sort of sacrifice to appease the angry god if he were unsuccessful. The first farmers recognized that their crops depended on more than the labor and skill of their efforts. Rain had to fall at the right time and in the right amounts. The sun had to shine for the right length of time. Storms could destroy the crops in a night. So the early farmer found gods in the sun, the storms, the water.

The search for God is an inner personal journey, but for most of human history it has been driven by the desire to affect outward results. The farmer wanted a good crop. The hunter wanted a kill. The soldier wanted a victory. And for each one it was obvious that their fate rested on more than they could see and control. So they searched for that power that affected their lives and they thought they found it in the sun, the wind, the storms. They tried to please the gods through sacrifices, prayers, performing outward deeds to appease the gods and searching their inward hearts for proper motivations. Much of their lives were geared to satisfying the powers that held dominion over their existence.

That we moderns have so thoroughly gained control over our worlds most of the time explains something of the reason why more and more of us regard the search for God as superstition or as a private exercise for those who already have the 'God gene'. When you can go to the grocery store and pick out any kind of tomato you can imagine any time of year, you are less dependent than a farmer on the fortunes of good weather. When you can go to the meat department and select your choice of meat with your preferred percentage of fat and the only actions required of you is to swipe a credit card and cut through the plastic wrap, the elusiveness of game and the unpredictability of the hunt don't enter your mind like a hunter. When warfare is performed by other people's kids, we are not driven into the arms of God like men and women in other ages for whom the realities of life and death, existence and sustenance were issues of body and spirit.

Likewise, when we can salve our consciences and souls with any number of distractions, with all sorts of feel-good activities...the search for inner peace, for forgiveness, for wholeness is a journey left unembarked. If something is wrong inside you, don't search deep down, go shopping instead. We substitute busyness for real relationships.... Even worship can become this sort of distraction. Church is the preferred distraction for many of us. We can get very distracted at church, doing lots of stuff, having services that dazzle and amaze us and even make us feel good. So it's great, all the distraction, none of the guilt.

Fully insulated and protected from the uncertainties of life, our drive to seek God is numbed. We happily live most of the time in Bette Midler's world where God is watching us from a distance.

But sometimes that's just not enough. We implore God, with Isaiah in 63:15 to 'look down and see'. That God would cast his gaze on us and see our plight and act. Sometimes we just want God to see what's going on down here.

But sometimes that's not enough either. Sometimes the pain within or the danger without is so overwhelming that nothing other than God coming near, God coming here will make a difference. We have that moment when we fall on our knees to beg God's forgiveness. We finally say, "I'm not in control. I never have been. You are. You are the potter. I am your clay. Forgive me. I give myself to you completely. You are my God. Come Lord. Come." And we join Isaiah's prayer, "that you would rip open the heavens and come down here."

That's quite a prayer. That God would break through the apparently solid dome of heaven to shake the most solid of earth's foundations and crack open the most solid of our defenses. The cry for God in this way is not a wish for a gentle deity of sweetness and light, no benign great soul of nature, no projection of human ideals upon the universe, no deistic clock-winder, no sentimentalized tribal icon—but a God utterly other than that which the world dreamed of, totally different from the gods of other nations, the complete unique ruler of all. A creator who is different from creation, but who can break into it at any time. And when he does lightning flashes, thunder rolls and the earth shakes. In the voice of his deeply discouraged people, Isaiah cries out for God to do it again.

Again and again, this is our prayer. It seems that God doesn't do that a whole lot. God is known more for his silence than his activity. The great preacher, Fred Craddock, confessed, "My problem with God has been God's timidity, God's quietness." If someone like that who communicates with God and for God daily has that kind of experience, what about the rest of us? We may be reminded of Mother Teresa's own confession to a close friend at one point in her life, "As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear."

Why is God so coy? Why does God show up so powerfully one time and seem so removed another? The one praying this prayer, "that you would rip open the heavens and come down" is old Isaiah. Young Isaiah experienced God right in his face. Young Isaiah (Chapter 6) had a heavenly vision of God's call. He had certainty. Now where is God? Why so seemingly unknown—sometimes seemingly unconcerned? Would that sometimes God would just rip open the heavens and come down. God did it in the past, why not now?

Remember Elijah? Would you ever be that brave? That guy challenged hundreds of prophets of this other god, Baal, to a preach-off. (Read I Kings 18:19-39). I don't know if I have that kind of faith.

One semester in college, I was struggling with God. Was this all just malarkey? I prayed, "God, I want to see one person's life changed." Not someone raised in the church, but someone without church ties. The semester wore on and it didn't happen. Rather than cry out like Isaiah, I began to rationalize that I hadn't prayed hard enough or had asked for something foolish. But on the next-to-last day of classes I came across a classmate with whom I'd studied earlier in the semester. She was reading a Bible and I asked her about it. She said that another student had asked her if she wanted to become a Christian and she said that she had accepted Christ and been changed. And I exclaimed that I had been praying for her all that time!

God, that you would rend the heavens and come down here!

I had this experience on a mission trip to West Virginia as a youth where at one point in a song I could feel the spirit of God moving in the room. I said something about it and other people in the group said the same thing. At that same moment in that one song, it was like the room was transformed. People in the congregation later that week told the same story. God was there.

And still our prayer remains. God, when the Hutus were slaughtering the Tutsis, that you would rip open heaven and come down here. When the Germans were gassing the Jews, rip open the heavens and come down. When little girls and little boys are having their lives destroyed by evil people, come down here and do something. I don't really understand why God doesn't come down in the worst moments of human history to keep humanity out of the ditch. But there were Christians hiding Jews in World War II. Maybe that was God. And there were Hutus and Tutsis risking their lives for one another. Maybe that's God.

God always has a funny and sometimes frustrating way of coming in the back door, of slipping in through the shadows and the quiet. Back in the day, God could have put his man on the throne of Rome and stopped some bad things going on in the world. He could have raised up an emperor, organized a benevolent government to make things right in the world. Maybe God considered that, like really thought about it, imagined what that would be like. And then decided, "No, it's better my way. It's better to change the world in another way. It's better to give them the chance to respond, to search for me. It's better if they have to have faith and if they have to trust me. I'm ready to come down there. Now where's the most unlikely place; where's the place where I'm least to be expected? Where's the last place anyone would think to look for me? That's where I'll go and turn the world upside down from there. Where should it be? Ah, there it is. The House of Bread. Bethlehem."

Our need for God is as deep as ever. Advent is an invitation, a nudging to look for God again, starting with Bethlehem. Maybe when we find him there, we are given eyes to see God in our own lives and times. In the most unlikely places. May you look for God with all your heart in every unlikely place and may you find that God has been tearing open the heavens to come find you.