

## A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*The Rugged Side of Advent*

Isaiah 64.1

Advent 1

December 3, 2023

Advent begins with a burst of color. Everything around us from the decorations to the food, to the Liturgical New Year's Eve party our children celebrated last night beams with delight. Stores and coffee shops are decorated up. The city lit our big tree and launched fireworks into the night sky. Advent begins with joy.

This, however, is not the sum total of Advent, not in church. And it can be disorienting, to hear readings like our gospel reading and our prophet reading this morning. They, and we with them, bear witness to the rugged side of Advent; the side, I want to suggest, is a side of Advent anchored in deep truth about history and human nature and our desire for a God who is hidden as much as known, who is absent as much as present, and who we need to get down here and fix some stuff.

Advent begins in trouble. This is where we begin, with trouble, that which we experience and that of others for whom we pray.

It was a terrible time of trouble in Israel's ancient history. The trouble was so terrible that the prophet Isaiah didn't speak for God to the people as the prophets normally did but turned around and spoke for the people to God. It is a terrible time, they said. O that you would tear open the heavens and come down. Where are you? Why are you silent? Why are you distant? Why are you restrained?

They experienced a God who must be up there, way up there, hidden behind the shroud of the canopy of sky. Look down on us, they cried. Look down from your holy, beautiful house. Our holy, beautiful house has been burned by fire and our pleasant places have become ruins. From the end of chapter 63 to the end of chapter 64, this has been called "the most powerful psalm of communal lamentation in the Bible" (Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 392).

In calling upon God, neither the prophet nor the people have a romantic idea that they are calling up a kind and feckless deity. When God comes, they imagine, mountains burn like kindlin and melt like snow. What in the world did they imagine would happen to people? When God comes, the sun darkens, and the moon shades and stars fall. When God comes, they believed, the heavens and earth are shaken. From the prophets through the gospels, the power of this imagery is important to grasp hold of. Heaven and Earth were two realms that did not change so easily. Their stability was a source of comfort in a world full of danger and in time of trouble. At least you could count on up staying up and down staying down. In our revolutionary impulses, we say we want the world to change and we want to change, but each of us has some measure of comfort in knowing the status quo stays the status quo. The more comfortable a

person is in their relationships, their finances, their agency in the world's systems, the less they really want things to change. Hey, it works for me.

The only one who wants everything to change is someone desperate enough to need change no matter what happens. Once change comes you don't know how it will shake out. If you shake the heavens and earth, watch out.

Yet, still, they prayed, rend the heavens, tear them open, and come down. Come down from your holy, beautiful house, because our house is burning to the ground. Advent begins with this desperation, a prayer for something to change; for God to come down here and so some stuff.

The biblical readings set the prayers for us, but they are filled out each year by contemporary prayers that add their own lament to the refrain.

Advent begins when 7-year-old Jewish girls are torn from their homes, thrown into vans, taken underground, and forced to watch videos of the murder of their parents.

Advent begins when Palestinian Christians darken the lights in Bethlehem in solidarity and lament for the thousands of their brothers and sisters killed in the war that has come over the heads of those in Gaza.

Advent begins where the rent's too high for the month and the fridge is too empty for dinner, where hours at work are getting smaller while the cost of everything is getting higher. It begins in the hallways of understaffed schools and underfunded health clinics.

Advent begins in the ice of a marriage frozen in the cold of unspoken resentments and in the empty space left from the one who left home in a volcano of anger and hurt and slammed doors.

Advent begins where ancient rainforests are buzz-sawed for soybean fields and where coral reefs are bleached in the ocean in the warmest water ever seen in the hottest year on human record.

Come down from your beautiful house, O Lord. Our house is on fire. There comes a time when the only thing worse than God's unleashed power is God's unrelenting silence. And the only thing worse than God's silence is God's absence. And the only thing worse than that is the last verse of chapter 63, "We have become like those over whom you have never ruled like those not called by your name." The worst thing in the world is being forgotten by a God who must remember lest we die.

This is where the rugged side of Advent begins: the places and situations in the world and in our lives where we need God to come.

Years ago a Romanian pastor told me as we drove the streets of the city of Brasov looking at bullet holes in the masonry of the buildings, “A revolution begins on the day when you would rather die than go on living the way you are living. It does not begin until that day.”

That’s when Advent begins, too. The first day of Advent is the day you would rather die than go on living the way things are going without God coming. It does not begin until that day. Karl Barth said the church knows no time but Advent.

So Advent begins when you light a candle against the darkness and you pray something like: “God, I can take anything. I can take your judgment; I can take your calling. I can take your correction. I cannot take your silence. Look down, come from your house. My house is on fire.”

Advent begins in the dark where a young couple wonders how to have a present under the tree for their child who knows nothing of inflation or student loan payments. They light a candle and pray come, Lord.

Advent begins in lonely mid-winter nights and long Covid and at gravesides for parents. It begins with the prayer of suffering communities around the world and those who pray in solidarity with them. It begins in the rifts of the world, or it does not begin at all.

Our prayers are to a God who is hidden, in the case of Isaiah, somewhere behind a veil of heavenly firmament, impenetrable to our eyes and our prayers which keep bouncing back down empty like an echo of our own voice. Yet we pray.

Blaise Pascal wrestled with this, not necessarily an exegesis of Isaiah 64, though maybe, but more pointedly, the experience of humans of the hiddenness of God. Pascal concluded, “Every religion which does not affirm that God is hidden, is not true.” Fleming Rutledge adds, “In spite of God’s hiddenness, the memory of what God has done in the past continues to activate hope for what he will do in the future. This is the movement of the Advent season. The God who hides himself is still the God of the covenant. He is absent and present at the same time” (*Advent*, 260). Rutledge examines this paradox for which there are no easy answers. God’s presence, when taken for granted, is no longer real presence but hidden. God’s absence, when felt acutely by those who hunger for God, is experienced as a kind of presence. Samuel Terrien writes that the presence of God, is “a surging which soon vanishes and leaves in its disappearance an absence that has been overcome” (quoted in Rutledge, *Advent*, 261).

This is what the church believes about God. It’s not a panentheism in which God is always marginally present, humming in the same measure in all material things. Sometimes I wish it were so, but then how could that not be a religion in which God is taken for granted and ultimately in which God is rightly judged inert? The lament of Isaiah is but one of the dramatic witnesses in scripture to the paradox of the absent presence and present absence of God who comes and is coming. The paradoxes stack up. We who wait with urgent patience wait for the Lord, whose day is near. And we keep waiting, holding onto memory and hope.

Advent is for the uncomfortable, for those not satisfied with the status quo, or can't live with it any longer. Advent is for the dissatisfied, for anyone who cries out in the dark for some help or some relief. And who does so refusing to relinquish either memory or hope.

When memory is strong enough to withstand the dark, it is faith. When hope holds the light for others in the dark, it is love.

With a memory that becomes faith and a hope that becomes love, comes an Advent prayer of desperation: that you would rend the heavens and come down.

In our memory and hope, we remember why this is an Advent prayer: because God didn't answer the prayer. God did not answer their prayer, not as they prayed it. God was not hidden behind the sky and then tore it open to come down.

God was not hidden behind the sky. He is always here, even when he's coming. Oh, God did come. God does come. But God did not tear open the cosmos to come. In Advent, we remember again, that, to come to us, God came to Mary. God opened the heart and opened the womb of a woman. God took flesh. Through her, God came near. She holds the light in the darkness; she is the bridge from the other shore. She is the memory and faith, the hope and sign of love that is mightier than our perils and our fears.

That's where we are going. So we begin here, we must begin here, in a prayer that can shake the cosmos and can change the world and can light hope in the dark for those who dare to begin their Advent with a prayer: O come, Emmanuel, God be *with* us.

Amen.

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