



Quaking at God's Presence
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37
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We start the Season of Advent today. To the secular world, it's a time of frenetic spending designed around the manipulation of the Christmas themes of hope, peace, and joy devoid of any serious spirituality. The commercialization of Christmas promises to achieve the spirit of joy with any merchandise presented as absolutely necessary for that experience. It's a time when our fast-paced life seems to accelerate even more. Shopping, traveling, organizing Christmas parties can be exhausting and anxiety provoking. This is a time of economic stress which we seem to embrace with excitement on one hand and reluctance on the other. It can be hard to take any time to reflect on the meaning and significance of Advent.

Yet, this is perhaps what we in the West experience in Advent.

In many **hot spots of the world**, like in Gaza and Israel, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Sudan, just to name a few, bloodshed, destruction, falling bombs, homelessness, hunger, and misery mark a time of high chaos and uncertainty. The majority of the people, innocent bystanders, seem to be caught in the middle of powerful conflicting forces.

It's a **historical chaos** that seems to repeat itself and into which the world gets dragged ignoring the wisdom of the experience of having gone down that road before. We don't seem to learn how to prevent and protect ourselves from the harm and desolation that arrogance, lies, lust for power, and hatred can produce. The closest we in the West can come to the anxiety that the rest of the world experiences is by considering how ideological divisions can tear us apart, and how an ecological disaster threatens the future of our children.

In the face of all this Isaiah's prayer of distress rings true for any longing heart: "Oh that You would tear open the heavens and come down..."

Advent is a time to remember that **God entered this chaotic and wounded world willingly**, and that Christ's arrival as a vulnerable child is **an act of solidarity** with all people, but especially with those who are in the most precarious positions in society: the marginalized and the forgotten, the voiceless and the disdained.

This is often forgotten in our instinct to imagine Advent and Christmas as times for cheery, naïve, and saccharine optimism, as opposed to the challenging yet authentic hope of Christianity. This real hope arises from our recognition that **Christ draws near to us in our brokenness, loneliness, and suffering.**

Palestinian Christian leaders across denominations in the West Bank decided last week that they will celebrate a simple Christmas this year as a mark of solidarity with their brethren in Gaza. There will be **no public celebrations, no marching bands, no twinkling Christmas lights and no decorated tree in Bethlehem's Manger Square** — not as long, they say, as a state of war reigns over the embattled Gaza Strip, and the majority of its residents cope with Israeli bombardments, the devastation of their homes and a spiraling humanitarian crisis.¹

Advent is a time of anticipation. What are our longings? How do we anticipate God showing up? Is that a fearful proposition to you? How do you imagine God dealing with us?

Isaiah 64 is a lament and a plead for mercy and redemption. Isaiah is begging God to please, come down. Chapter 64, from Third Isaiah, derives from the fifth century BCE, when the Jewish people had returned to Jerusalem from their political exile in Babylon. What they see is desolation and destruction. All they are familiar with is gone. But

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/29/palestinian-christians-christmas-ceasefire-cancel/?utm_campaign=wp_todays_headlines&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpirs=nl_headlines; see also [Christian leaders in Bethlehem say cancelled Christmas celebrations are to emphasize 'spiritual meaning' \(foxnews.com\)](#)

Isaiah does not plead for a return to the past. The past has brought only misery. It's like saying: "Our righteousness is dead and missing in action therefore, we live in misery and this is self-procured and self-imposed."

The prophet's oracle pleads that, like on Sinai, God will descend to earth to visit the people. But the people must repent, their lives a reflection of God the potter who shaped them. Isaiah's people must learn the fear of the Lord again. To melt before the Lord is right and salutary.

Our sins isolate us from God. God hides God's face in the presence of our sins. Is God's "hiddenness" an invitation to sit with our thoughts for a time, with our guilty conscience and inadequacy? Can that "silence" teach us anything? When our words are shallow and our deeds exploitative, God's presence is not being communicated: we do not witness to the living and gracious God. Therefore, we suffer, others suffer.

Yet, God promises to be with us still. God's faithful words will not pass unfulfilled. Christ will come again. The apocalyptic style of the gospel affirms the faith community's confidence that no matter how crushed we might be, God has not abandoned us. No matter how hopeless we might feel, God's gift of salvation remains.

As we begin the season of Advent, perhaps we might spend some time thinking about a celebration of hope that finds its meaning not in escapism or superficial optimism, but the powerful sign of divine love contained in God really entering the messiness, the painful, suffering, broken world in which we find ourselves. Let us be confident in the God who saves.

"Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing away:

 God never changes.

 Patience obtains all things.

Whoever has God lacks nothing.

God alone suffices."

-- St. Teresa of Avila, Spain (Carmelite nun, 1515–1582)