

November 27, 2011, First Sunday of Advent (Cycle C)

“Tear Open the Heavens”

Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the time in our church year when we prepare our hearts and souls for the coming of Christ.

The liturgical color for Advent is purple, for royalty, to welcome the king who is about to be born. Purple also is the color of penitence, of turning our lives around to be ready for the coming of Christ.

For months now, with the exception of the use of white for All Saints' Day and Thanksgiving Sunday, we have been using green. Ever since the Day of Pentecost, we have been in the church season of Kingdomtide, which is also called Ordinary Time. It's not called Ordinary Time because there's nothing special about it.

It gets its title from the same word as ordination, a time when we celebrate what Christ was called to do and what the Church is called to do! This is why it's also called Kingdomtide----a time when we learn about building God's Kingdom.

So after so much green, so many weeks of a time of growth, which is what the green signifies, suddenly we see purple in God's house, a reminder of Christ's divine nature as the Prince of Peace and King of Kings, and a call to prepare our hearts to welcome him.

And we start the story of Christ over, beginning from the time before he was born. Every year, we get a chance to start fresh, to begin again, to reaffirm our faith or embrace it for the first time, when Christ is born in our hearts at Christmas!

All of this is a way of saying that today we begin our new church year! Today, for the Church, is New Year's Day! So Happy New Year!

As we start a new year, some of us may have a very clear awareness of God's presence close to us, of the many ways that God has blessed us, that God has definitely called us to serve in specific ways. Those favored few may have very few questions and have everything planned out in confidence and assurance ---a strong faith in God and the strength of spirit to follow Christ.

But others of us may have many questions that we would like to ask God. We may be struggling and feeling kind of lost in our journey to find the path that God calls us to follow.

We may have reservations and obstacles. We may feel called to serve in a very specific way, but Life is getting in the way----caring for elderly parents or children or grandchildren, or maybe all three. Money may be too tight to allow the decision that your heart wants you to make, or maybe there's not enough time or maybe you don't have the energy these days to get up and do what you feel you are called to do.

Maybe, for some of us, God feels very far away. Prayer may be pretty much impossible because it feels like you are praying and no one is listening. Or maybe the words that you need to pray just don't exist at the moment.

Maybe life has piled troubles too deep to see the light any more, and all any well-meaning friend can say is "If you feel far from God, guess who moved." Not a very helpful thought at all when you don't even know what direction to go.

Some of us might be grieving or depressed or facing terminal illnesses or long-term unemployment or other circumstances that lead us into hopelessness and despair, places that are so far from God that we just can't imagine that we can find our way back.

Too many questions, too much doubt. Those of us who are at the end of our ropes might just want to let go and forget about trying to find God any more. It just doesn't seem possible that God even cares any more.

And the worst part, too often we hide our thoughts and feelings even from each other, even from our own church family! We can be afraid to admit our fears and doubts because we think we are alone in feeling that way! We are afraid it means we have an unforgivable or insurmountable lack of faith!

The truth is that everyone has times in their lives when God seems silent, when it feels like God doesn't care, that he has abandoned us.

And maybe especially at this time of year, when everyone else's days seem to be "merry and bright," our own dark state of mind threatens to overwhelm us and we feel all alone in our sadness.

People of every time and place have felt abandoned by God at times. There are many psalms that beg God to come back, please don't stay away forever! All through the writings of the prophets we see this as well.

This morning's passage from the 64<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah is just one example.

The context for this morning's passage is that the Hebrew people have returned to Jerusalem from exile. They have been freed from captivity only to come home and find the place completely in ruins. The Temple is destroyed, and so is much of the rest of the city.

People who were there throughout the exile are getting in the way of reconstruction, and even the exiles themselves are having problems working together to get the job done!

They are frustrated and discouraged. Hopelessness begins to show itself. The people have been through a lot, too much really, and to keep on having problems is just too much.

They want God to show up, to do something, to take care of them.

And so the passage begins----

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

Tear open the heavens and come down, God! Help us! Be with us!

Take care of us!

Isaiah says that the people sinned because God had hidden from them. That might just be shifting the blame, but it can feel like that, can't it?

When we despair, when we feel hopeless and helpless, we just might do something we shouldn't.

Tear open the heavens and come down! Make it clear beyond the shadow of a doubt that you are here, God---that you're with us and that you are helping us!

Tear down the heavens and come down, God! We are all sinners. We all need your help! We need you to care about us!

Why? Because you are the potter and we are the clay! You are the one and only God, the one who made us! We need our creator to care about us! We are only mortals, only temporary! It is only in your love and care that we are worth anything at all!

Forgive us for everything wrong we have done. After all, we are your people. We belong to you.

Tear open the heavens and come down!

Don't you pray that sometimes? Where are you, God? I have prayed and prayed and still I struggle and suffer. It seems like you're ignoring my cries for help and comfort! Come down here, God! Please, show yourself. Be with me and take care of me!

Tear open the heavens and come down!

Several centuries later, Jesus talked to his followers about a time when "there would not be one stone left on top of another"---that the temple would once again be torn down. They asked him to explain and he told them---

'But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory."

The sun and moon and stars will be disrupted and the Son of Man will tear open the heavens and come down!

God incarnate will tear open the heavens, will break the barrier between us and our creator. The ruler of the universe will tear open the heavens and come down!



Just like the people in the time just before Christ was born looked around and saw oppression and unbelief, we see inequity, oppression, suffering, and people who do not know the one, true God.

If God tore open the heavens and came down, wouldn't they have to believe? Wouldn't that solve all of our problems----just tear open the heavens and come down!!

Or maybe not. Jesus told us that no one knows the day or the hour when he will return.

And the message about staying alert and ready is telling us that we need to do more than sit on a mountaintop and watch the heavens for any sign of tearing.

It's telling us that we must have hope.

Hope that he is with us already, that he has already torn open the heavens. Hope that is found in being the Body of Christ to each other!

This morning we lit the Advent candle of Hope and we prayed for that hope to light up our lives. Where do we find that hope, if we have lost it?

I believe we find it in each other, in the love between us, which begins in the love God has for us. I believe that hope begins with a stable full of hay and animals, that stands open, waiting for the holy one, the Messiah, to come and be born there.

I believe that hope lives here, in us, with us, among us, in hearts that are crying out to God, "Tear open the heavens and come down!"

If your heart is empty, if you are struggling and suffering and longing for God's presence to become real in your life, hope lives in you!

Hope is there, where there is an empty place----where there is room at the inn, the inn of your soul.

Make a place for the King of Kings to be born all over again this Christmastime!

Stay ready! The heavens will tear open, and God incarnate, Emmanuel, will come down and be with you, if only there is room for hope within you!

God tears open the heavens, and hope lives here! Amen!