

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9; John 1:10-13

Message: He Will Expose You

December 23, 2018: Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

Advent 4

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Read Isaiah 64:1-4

“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!”

“Enough already! God, where are you?”

It's as if the prophet is looking up defiantly into the heavens and utters a terrible cry, “Why? Why won't you rip open the heavens and come down here and do something? We rotted in that God-forsaken Babylon for over 50 years. We've come back here to desolation. Our land is overrun by rabble. Our temple, your house, is a pile of rubble. Our enemies taunt us and ridicule us, ‘Where is your God? Why doesn't he come to rescue you?’”

How often has that question been asked? How often have you or I asked the same question? “God, why don't you come? Why don't you do something? You used to come. Oh yes, you would come and make the mountains quake. You came and spoke to Moses in the cloud. The people trembled when you spoke. You led us through the waters and out of Egypt. You saved us when we were surrounded by our enemies. You came, and you did awesome deeds. Don't you remember? God, where are you? Why why won't you rip open the heavens and come down?”

That cry is called a lament. It is a cry from the heart, a cry that arises out of the terrible sense of being abandoned by God, a gut-wrenching conviction that things are is not the way things should be.

We don't hear a lot of lament in the Christmas season. It's all about joy and happy and fa-la-la-la-la and decking halls and bright wrapping and lights and gifts. But no amount of tinsel and Christmas carols will deny the reality of lament that is in many hearts.

There is a lot of lament in the Bible. There is a whole book called “Lamentations”. Many of the Psalms are laments. In the Bible's laments, the people argue in protest with God. Their arguments accuse God of abandoning them. With passion and tears they cry to God to come and heal their land.

That was then. This is now. What about today? Is there lament? Is there lament among the people of God?

There is lament for a world of wild fires and wars and refugees and government funding cuts and closing factories. There is lament for ongoing pain and sickness and grief. There is lament that the way things are in the church and in the world is not the way things should be.

“How about doing something spectacular, God. This place used to be filled. So often it’s the same people doing the same things around here. And people can take good care of their own lives, but we don’t have enough money to meet our budget. Why, Lord, don’t you bless your people and make us generous again? How about a show of power, God? How about shaking things up a bit?!

“You also said that you would turn the world upside down, tearing rich people from their thrones and lifting people out of poverty. But the rich still get richer. The poor are still with us, in larger numbers. We don’t know how to help all those people struggling with mental illness or how to help people living on the streets to find a warm bed in the cold. Can’t you shake a few people, God, and do something? Tear open the heavens and come down! Do something about all the problems in our world?!”

But once we have cried out in unspeakable sadness, once we have lamented the seeming silence of God, then what?

Read Isaiah 64:5-7

Did you hear the prophet shift in focus? After crying out to God, it’s as if he stops and thinks a bit. He looks off in the distance and in the stillness he remembers. He lowers his voice and continues. But it’s no longer a demand for action. It’s a confession.

“God you were angry with us and we kept on sinning.

You called to us and we did not listen.

Since ancient times we’ve continued to do wrong.

Our best actions are filthy through and through.

No one turns to you in prayer. No one goes to you for help.

Perhaps ... perhaps that’s why you are silent. You have hidden yourself from us because of our sins.”

To know God, to hope for grace and renewal, includes repentance and confession.

If we are going to continue in disobedience, why should we expect God to help us? If we are going to insist on selfishly putting ourselves first, why should we expect God to shower us with blessings? If we are going to insist on our own way of doing things without making room for others who have a different style or taste or expression, why should we expect God to fill our church? How do we welcome people who come to church or do we only talk to our friends? Do we give freedom and opportunity for people to use the gifts which the Lord has blessed them with or do we insist that they fit the programs and structures that we have

clearly defined? If we say nothing against, or participate in, injustice around us, why should we expect God to act?

Do we have some confessing to do of our own unwillingness to allow God to do his work or not participating in his work? Do we have some confessing to do of not listening to God's leading or not cooperating with his leading? Do we have some confessing to do of our quenching of the work of the Holy Spirit?

After the terrible cry of lament, after the humble prayer of confession, the prophet dared to do the unthinkable. For the first time he speaks the intimate name of the Lord, Yahweh, and reminds the Lord of who he is

Read Isaiah 64:8

You are our Father;

You are our potter;

We are all the work of your hand.

In these two images of father and potter, the prophet and all of Israel are saying: "You made us, you own us, you are responsible for us, we belong to you. We are your responsibility, your burden, your problem, your treasured possession."

And as the prophet reminds God, so he reminds himself, "Hey! That's right. We belong to the Lord. He will not, he cannot disown us. We are the people of God."

With that realization comes relief. We are not just calling on a mighty and powerful God to tear open the skies and do something spectacular. He is our Father. We are not afraid of this God who might reject us and turn his back on us because we have offended him by sinning against him. The amazing realization is that we can know this God and trust him. We move from a wild, angry demand for God to come down in awesome power, to a quiet confidence, to a passionate petition of trust.

Isaiah 64:9

We could not be good enough or do enough good to make God love us. But God loves us and shows his love in Jesus. He does not remember our sins, but he forgives. He is our Father through Jesus Christ his Son. "To all who receive Jesus, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

You see, God did act on the words of Isaiah. He did tear open the heavens and come down. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a whole choir of angels came down to announce to the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest, for the Saviour has been born."

And the mountains shook with an earthquake when death thought it did its worst and Jesus died on the cross. At that moment God ripped the curtain of the temple from top to bottom and the dividing wall between God and humanity came tumbling down.

Again on the morning when God rolled away the stone and Jesus came out of the grave with the shaking of rocks, defeating the power of death.

And the day came when God tore open the heavens and came down as a rushing wind and tongues of fire, and on Pentecost the church was born.

So let us be very careful when we cry out our lament to God and ask why he doesn't rip open the heavens and come down. Because God has a way of taking our lament and our confession and our prayer of trust very seriously. The God who came "down" to us in Jesus Christ, who adopts us as his children, comes to us constantly, molding and shaping us in the image of Jesus. We are the clay; he is the Potter. He will come down and expose your sin and change you into his servant. He will lead you into action that might surprise you. God is always transforming us from filthy rags and dried-up leaves into beautiful vessels of God's goodness and grace.

In this Advent season, we also remember that the God who split the heavens to come down to us in Christ Jesus, and always comes to us by the Holy Spirit, is coming again. Some day soon God will again rend the heavens to come down to God's creation to turn it into the new earth and heavens, the eternal home of God among God's redeemed creatures.

We long for that day when God will tear open the heavens to come as the sacrificed Lamb and victorious King. Though we have continued to sin against God and each other, we don't have to be afraid. After all, the one who will "look upon" (9) us will be our Saviour who lived, died and rose again from the dead for us.

Go ahead and cry out to God. With tears or shouting express your lament. Be prepared to have your sin exposed. Be assured that God is Your Father in Jesus. Believe on him and claim your place as his child. See how the potter is continuing to shape the work of his hands, and to direct you in faithful service.

Until he comes again.

Amen.