

When God Comes Down

Oh God, Come Down!

Isaiah 64:1-9

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Scripture

In many churches, the several weeks prior to Christmas are known as *Advent*, from the Latin word meaning, “coming.” This preparatory season always begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. Thus, today is the *First Sunday of Advent*.

The observance of the season of Advent can be traced to the late fifth century in Italy and Gaul, and perhaps a bit earlier in Spain. Let me mention several features of Advent worth noting.

First, the *First Sunday of Advent* is regarded by many churches as the first Sunday of the Christian year. Advent is a time to anticipate the birth and incarnation of Jesus Christ. Historically, however, Advent is not just the season of anticipation but the season of penitential preparation for coming of Jesus Christ.

Second, as a time for the preparation for the birth and incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Scripture readings during Advent have traditionally given special attention to prophecy, with a strong emphasis on repentance, as we shall see in Isaiah.

Third, many churches use an Advent wreath during the season of Advent. The wreath lies horizontally and is adorned with five candles. The candles often have different symbolic meanings. However, one of the views is that the outer four candles symbolize the four millennia covered in the Old Testament history, and the inner candle represents the birth and incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Fourth, the traditional liturgical color for the season of Advent is purple. The color purple represents royalty (for the coming of the King) and also penitence (as befits a season of renewed repentance).

Fifth, because of the emphasis on repentance as the proper preparation for the coming of God, Advent is actually a season of great seriousness rather than great festivity. Historically, the season of Advent was a somber, reflective, repentant season in which

God's people look forward to the time when God comes down. Christmas Day was the start of the festive time, which traditionally lasts the twelve days of Christmas, from December 25 to January 6. Christians in earlier centuries would be surprised at the current emphasis on festivities prior to December 25.

Now, it is my intention to spend the four Sundays of Advent this year looking at the Old Testament lessons which are read during the first four Sundays of the Christian year. Many churches read these Old Testament texts during Advent. The focus of these texts is on the penitential preparation of the people of God looking forward to the time when God comes down.

The Old Testament lesson for the First Sunday of Advent this year is Isaiah 64:1-9. Let me give you the context for this text.

Isaiah was a prophet called by God to preach to God's people in the southern kingdom of Judah in the 8th century BC. He came from a wealthy family, was well-educated, and preached for a period of more than forty years.

The opening sentence of the book that bears his name, Isaiah, lists the four kings who ruled Judah during the ministry of Isaiah: "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah (died 740 BC), Jotham (750-731 BC), Ahaz (735-715 BC), and Hezekiah (729-686 BC), kings of Judah" (Isaiah 1:1).

Isaiah's ministry took place during a time of great spiritual and political turmoil.

The kingdom had divided about 200 years earlier into Israel in the north and Judah in the south. God's people were in spiritual decline in both kingdoms. They were abandoning the things of God and were become increasingly secular and worldly.

In addition to the spiritual declension there was a great political and military threat from the Assyrians. They were expanding, and in fact they defeated Israel in 722 BC and took the people of Israel into captivity. Judah was extremely worried as the Assyrians were threatening to attack and defeat them too.

It is in this context that Isaiah preached and wrote his book.

Isaiah warned the people of Judah of God's approaching judgment because of their moral decline, political corruption, social injustice, and especially spiritual idolatry. Because the nation would not turn away from its sinful practice, Isaiah announced the ultimate overthrow of Judah (which took place in 586 BC).

Nevertheless, God would remain faithful to his covenant. He would preserve a godly remnant, and he would also send deliverance through a coming Messiah. The Messiah would come out of Judah and accomplish the twin work of redemption and restoration.

Our text today is Isaiah's prayer on behalf of God's people. It is a deep cry of petition and confession, which could be summarized as follows, "Oh God, come down!" Let's read Isaiah 64:1-9:

**¹Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at your
presence—
²as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
and that the nations might tremble at your
presence!
³When you did awesome things that we did not look for,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your
presence.
⁴From of old no one has heard
or perceived by the ear,
no eye has seen a God besides you,
who acts for those who wait for him.
⁵You meet him who joyfully works righteousness,
those who remember you in your ways.
Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we
be saved?
⁶We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted
garment.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.**

**⁷There is no one who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have made us melt in the hand of our
iniquities.**

**⁸But now, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.**

**⁹Be not so terribly angry, O LORD,
and remember not iniquity forever.
Behold, please look, we are all your people. (Isaiah
64:1-9)**

Introduction

It is no surprise that as we enter this Advent season we have a lot of concern regarding the future.

We are facing the greatest economic recession since World War II. Your retirement and investments have probably dropped from 30 to 50% in just the last three months.

Earlier this fall oil was almost \$150 per barrel, but it has dropped to just over \$50 per barrel.

Home foreclosures are at an all-time high. And we learned in recent weeks about the debacle at Fannie Mae and Freddy Mac.

Many businesses have declared bankruptcy. In fact, you probably received an email this past week warning you about buying gift cards this Christmas from about 25 companies who were likely to declare bankruptcy after Christmas. Then, those gift cards would be worthless, and you would not be able to redeem them.

Many people are worried about losing their jobs. Or, if they have jobs, they are in industries that are not making sales, such as real estate and housing.

We are still fighting a war on two fronts, in Iraq and Afghanistan. And although things seem to be improving, we just had a horrific terror attack in India.

We are engaged in a worldwide war against Islamic jihadist

terrorists. But, unfortunately, some people don't believe that we are in a war against Islamic jihadist terrorists.

On top of all this, the church is not doing so well. In the last 10 years, although there has been about a 5% growth among all groups who identify themselves as Christian, there has been 40% growth among other religions. In the last 10 years, Islam has almost doubled, Hinduism has almost doubled, Buddhism has almost tripled, and Wiccans have grown twenty-fold.

Spiritually, the church in this country is lethargic, lackluster, lazy, and languid. There is little vitality and life.

Lesson

Friends, our day is similar to Isaiah's day.

Isaiah 64:1-9 is a prayer by the prophet Isaiah. He prays, in essence, "Oh God, come down!" He is praying with passion. He wants God to come down and do something.

Isaiah wants God to come down and shake up this world. He wants God to come down and revive his people. He wants God to come down and change his enemies into worshipers.

For Isaiah there is no greater joy than when God comes down. That is why he prays, "Oh God, come down!"

I like the way pastor and commentator Ray Ortlund puts it. He says, "What God wants for us is a passion for his glory to be unrestrained, coming down into our experience in new ways. This matters. Typical American Christianity today just isn't enough to meet the challenge of our times. We need God to come down."¹

Isaiah is teaching us how to pray. He is teaching us how to pray for the intervention of God in our world today.

I. We Pray for the Presence of God (64:1-5a)

First, we pray for the presence of God.

¹ Ortlund, R. C., Jr. & Hughes, R. K., *Isaiah : God Saves Sinners*. Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 430.

Isaiah begins his prayer by pleading with God, **“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!”** (64:1-2).

In other words, Isaiah prays, “Oh God, we need an unusual divine event. We are thankful for the steady blessings you give us day by day. But these are desperate times. We are in a pathetic condition. We need the unmistakable intervention of God. Oh God, come down!”

Have you ever been in a worship service when you became aware of the unmistakable presence of God? You realized, like Moses, that you were standing on holy ground? You realized that you had business to do with God?

God is able to come down and visit us with an unusual sense of his presence and power. We know this from Isaiah 64:1.

But we also know this from the history of God’s people. In 1735 God came down in New England. Jonathan Edwards recorded what he saw in his own town:

The town seemed to be full of the presence of God. It never was so full of love, nor of joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God’s presence in almost every house. It was a time of joy in families on account of salvation being brought unto them; parents rejoicing over their children as new born, and husbands over their wives, and wives over their husbands. . . . Our public assemblies were then beautiful. . . . The assembly in general was, from time to time, in tears while the Word was preached, some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.²

I remember the night that God came down for me. I was nineteen years old. I had become aware that I was a sinner and under

² Jonathan Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards on Revival* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995 reprint), 14.

the wrath of God. I needed a Savior. In his grace God came down to me on Easter Sunday evening in 1976. I encountered the presence of God in Jesus, and I was transformed by his grace, never to be the same again.

Ray Ortlund reminds us that much of the American Christianity we take for granted today is subnormal. Churches here and there are growing with the power of God upon them. But as a whole, American Christianity is drifting into historic inconsequentiality.

Why is that? We are satisfied with our current condition. We feel little urgency. We have no longing. We are hardly aware of our mediocrity. We have lost the vision of the prophets and apostles. We have forgotten that to whom much is given, much is required (Luke 12:48).

So, what should we do? We must choose to accept the inconvenient, disturbing, question-provoking, ego-humbling, prayer-stimulating, church-changing, prophetic burden that the glory of God would come down upon us today. Let's embrace the longing. Let's live with it. Let's pray for it. Let's die with it on our hearts. And as we pray, let's stay open to God.³

Isaiah continues his prayer, **“When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence”** (64:3).

What does God's work in the past teach us? We learn that God is not predictable, but rather that he is surprising.

God never acts contrary to his own Word. He never acts out of character. But he is also never at a loss for new ways to act.

For example, the people of God were cornered at the Red Sea. The Egyptian army was approaching fast. There seemed no way out. What happened? The Red Sea opened up. Nobody was expecting that.

The world was stumbling in darkness. There was no way forward. What happened? God came down in the person of the

³ Ortlund, 433.

Messiah, and he was born in a stable. Nobody was expecting that.

We were under the wrath of God, and we deserved to go to hell for all eternity. Our guilt was great, and we had no defense. What happened? Our Judge paid the penalty on our behalf by dying on the cross in our place. Nobody was expecting that.

Jesus was dead and buried. All the hopeful expectations he had created evaporated. What happened? He rose from the grave, ascended to the Father in heaven, and sent his Spirit so that his enemies became his friends. Nobody was expecting that.

Friends, God is still full of surprises. He does what nobody expects. Many of you can think of someone who was radically changed when God came down.

We should always pray, “Oh God, come down!”

And why should we pray for the presence of God? Because, unlike our idols, God acts. Isaiah prays, **“From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him”** (64:4). No one has ever trusted God in vain. He acts on behalf of his own people.

What God wants from his people are those who walk in obedience to him and his ways. Isaiah says, **“You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways”** (64:5a). God does not meet the indolent one, nor the lucky one, but the one who is joyfully, humbly going along in the simple, ordinary path of obedience. That is the person God meets.

And so, we pray for the intervention of God in our world today by beginning with a prayer for the presence of God.

II. We Confess Our Long-Standing Sins (64:5b-7)

Second, we confess our long-standing sins.

As we pray for the presence of God, for God to come down, we become aware of our long-standing sins. And we need to confess them.

Isaiah prayed, **“Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We**

have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities” (64:5b-7).

Isaiah uses four similes—notice the word **“like”** four times—to help us confess our long-standing sins.

First, we are **like one who is unclean**, that is, like a leper. Lepers used to live away from everyone else, and when they walked around, they had to shout, “Unclean! Unclean!” That was to warn people to stay away so that they would not become infected. I am like a leper. I could warn everyone I meet, “Hi! I am Freddy Fritz. I am contagious with the leprosy of sin. You better keep your distance. I might infect you with my sin.” That is my sinful nature.

Second, we are **like a polluted garment**. The Hebrew word actually means “menstrual cloths.” Notice that it is not just our sin that stinks, but in fact **all our righteous deeds** stink as well. We have nothing that is worth presenting to God. It is all sin.

Third, we are **like a leaf**. We fade away like a brittle autumn leaf. We just don’t last.

And fourth, we are **like the wind**. Our sin takes control of us and moves in directions that we never intended to go.

And so, we pray for the intervention of God in our world today by beginning with a prayer for the presence of God. And then we confess our long-standing sins.

III. We Pray for the Touch of God (64:8-9)

And third, we pray for the touch of God.

Isaiah prays, **“But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your**

people” (64:8-9).

This way of praying glorifies God because it expresses our radical need for him. We’re the clay, he’s the potter, and we need his touch to redesign us and reshape us to be more the way he wants us to be. God holds all power over us, like a potter over clay.

Does that discourage prayer? Is his sovereignty, the potter-clay relationship—is that a disincentive to prayer?

We can pray with confidence for this very reason: We are the clay; he is the potter. He is able to touch us again. We need it, again and again. And God has many methods of touch.

Isaiah is not asking that God wouldn’t discipline us but that God wouldn’t discipline us to the extent we deserve, because by God’s own choice we are his people and under his hand.

And so, we pray for the intervention of God in our world today by beginning with a prayer for the presence of God. Then we confess our long-standing sins. And then we pray for the touch of God.

Conclusion

As we enter this Advent season, it is right for us to pray with Isaiah, “Oh God, come down!”

We want God come down as he did many times throughout history.

We want God’s kingdom invisible kingdom to become visible.

We want God’s glory to be made known as far as the waters cover the sea.

We want Jesus to come down again and set things right. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

O God, come down!

We live in desperate times. Like the prophet Isaiah we live in a day in which we face problems politically and spiritually. We face an uncertain future, but we know the One who knows the future.

Would you come down and meet us in a new and surprising way. Oh God, remember your covenant. Don't restrain yourself at all. Have your way with us all, freely and entirely.

And for all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.