

Sermon
Dec. 3, 2017
First Sunday in Advent
Based on Isaiah 64:1-9
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Have you ever wished God would just rip open the sky, come down and fix things? I have. It is difficult to watch scenes of despair as famine ravages the land, seeing the hollow eyes and distended bellies of children. It is difficult to see towns and villages blown apart by bombs and machine gun fire like we have seen in Syria. We have seen hundreds of thousands of people flee their homes seeking safety, even survival, going over land or crossing the sea into Europe, a refugee crisis that has not been seen since World War II. We have seen an uptick in hateful speech, threats and harm against people labeled as “other” whether they be transgendered, Muslim, or Mexican. There is so much going on in the world that is out of whack, a time in which it would be great if God would just come on down here and clean up this mess.

Of course, it wasn't the exact same issues when the prophet wrote these words that were read this morning, beginning with that cry, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” For them, this was when they were returning from their exile in Babylon. They were going back home, to Jerusalem, to rebuild the city and the temple and do the hard work of bringing Israel back to its glorious days of old. But when they got back, they discovered that their rebuilding plans were not going to be so easy. There were other gods being worshipped in the land. Other peoples were living there, had established villages and towns, and they had their own ways of doing things. Israel's God was not a god that was recognized by the people living in Palestine when the Israelites returned from exile. It was a different world. And so the prophet spoke the longings of his people for God to show up and let these people who had moved in who the god of this land was. They wanted God to shake some mountains, to make a name for himself again so that the nations would know that the God of Israel was back and demanded respect.

They knew what God had done in the past. They remembered the ancient stories that had been passed down from generation to generation, of how God came down on Mt. Sinai to give Moses the Ten Commandments, and how the mountain shook. They knew the story of how God sent those plagues against the Egyptians, divided the Red Sea in two so that their ancestors could escape from slavery, and led them through the wilderness and then drove out the peoples that lived in the land of Canaan, the holy land, the land they were seeking to reclaim after their exile. They carried with them the stories of what God was capable of. It was this God that they wanted to see active again, to make his presence known.

We believe these stories as well. As Christians we also believe that God acted 2000 years ago by becoming a human being, working miracles, healing people, teaching the way that leads to life, and then suffering and dying as a common criminal, executed by the state, only to rise on the third day and promise the sending of the Holy Spirit on all people, promising that he will be with us always, even to the end of the age, promising that we will live forever.

We have heard stories of how the Spirit of God has acted, changing the hearts of people, converting individuals, families, communities, nations. The church of twelve located in Jerusalem is now the church of billions spread across the globe. God did that. This church exists by the action of God. God has acted in your life and in mine, in small and in big ways. In fact, your very existence is something that God had a hand in. We look around this room and see the activity of God.

But it doesn't seem enough. The world is broken. And we long for God to come and fix this broken world. We want to be hopeful, that it isn't too late for God to act, to make things right, to bring the nations together, to have a world where there is peace, where everyone can thrive, where nature is rebalanced and healthy. We want to hope that things can be better than they are, and that God can and will make sure that this happens.

But will God actually rip open the sky and come down? Will God finally get to the point where God says, "That's it! I can't take it anymore! I'm taking matters into my own hands!" If that's the way it's

going to be, how bad does it need to get for God to take action? What's the hold up?

This leads to another question. You know, we have been waiting for the Lord to come back for about 2000 years now. He still hasn't come back. You could say each day that passes is one day closer to the Lord's return. I have said that myself. But I wonder. How bad *does* it have to get for Jesus to come back? I mean, you would have thought the Lord would have come back during the Black Plague when between 1346 and 1353, just eight years, it is estimated that anywhere from 75 million to 200 million people died in Europe and Asia. And remember, there were a lot fewer people living on the earth back then. A lot of Christians those days were *convinced* they were living in the end times. Yet, we are still here. I know many, if not all of us, have wished that God would come back and fix things. It is part of our tradition as Christians to look for that time when Jesus will come in final victory and we will feast at his heavenly banquet. And yet, here we are in this mess.

When the prophet wrote these words all those years ago, a few hundred years before Jesus was born, he confronted the issue of why God had not shown up or made God's presence known to the nations. He said that their sin as a people had prompted God to hide God's face from them. He said all of the people were like one who is unclean. Even their good deeds were like filthy rags. In other words, the prophet made it clear that all of them, individually and as a people, had made a mess of things. Ultimately, the broken world in which they lived was the consequence of human actions and much of those actions were of their hand. The prophet acknowledged their complicity in the mess.

Did you know that "complicit" was the word of the year according to Dictionary.com? Search for the word spiked when Ivanka Trump, in an interview, said in a response to a question that she did not know what "complicit" means. Apparently, a lot of other people didn't either. For the record, the word means "choosing to be involved in an illegal or questionable act, especially with others."

Doing something illegal is likely not anything we would be caught up in. But what about a "questionable act"? That can get a little murky. I wonder if there are things we do that could be questionable but we don't

see it that way or think about it. For example, most of us like chicken wings. Or when our kids were young we would run through the McDonald's drive-thru to get some chicken nuggets. How were those chickens raised? Were they raised among thousands of other chickens, crammed inside a sterile facility? If those chickens that became our Buffalo wild wings were raised in an inhumane manner, are we complicit when we purchase and eat those wings?

There's this little joke that Kim and I have when she tells me about the great deal she got on clothes when she buys them at Kohl's. I ask her half in jest, "You know why those clothes are so cheap? Because the children that made them are only paid a couple dollars a day." I don't know if that's true. But what about the people from Malaysia and Bangladesh who make our cheap clothes? Do they make a living wage? If not, are we complicit when we buy those clothes?

These days nearly all of us have smart phones. Some of us have more than one, one for work and another for personal use. Inside of each of these phones are various precious metals. Those metals have to be mined. What are the safety conditions of those who mine the metals that go into these phones? If they are unsafe, are we complicit when we buy these phones?

The truth is that there is a lot of injustice and oppression in our world. Someone is responsible for it. But it isn't always easy to know who to blame or who is responsible. What I am trying to suggest is that the conveniences that we enjoy, cheap food, cheap clothes, not exactly cheap smart phones, may indirectly contribute to the suffering of those who make these products or harvest our food. The health of the earth is impacted by our consumption. Directly or indirectly, our lives are entangled with those who suffer and our convenience may be on the backs of their unjust suffering. All of this is to say that just as the prophet said all those years ago, we are all unclean. We are all like dried up leaves blown around by the wind.

I know, that sounds pretty gloomy. Where's your holiday spirit, Pastor Kevin? For those of us here who already feel a little blue, I don't mean to add more weight to your shoulders. The point I'm trying to make here is that we are all in this together. None of us are pure. In

varying degrees, we all have the stain of sin. We are all compromised. We are all complicit. We are all in need of forgiveness.

And here's the really good news. We still belong to God. That's what the prophet wrote. He said, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay, and you are our potter... We are all your people." This is the situation: we have all become like one who is unclean *and* we are the work of God's hand. What God makes is precious. You and I are precious. But our actions through life gets us knocked around, blemished, out of kilter. Nevertheless, we still belong to God. And God can still work on us, reshape us, as a potter works the clay.

That reshaping starts when we are honest with ourselves, how we are living our lives. Any time is a good time to take stock of our lives, confess what we need to confess, and turn back toward God. We say a prayer of confession every Sunday at church. It's an old Christian spiritual practice to end each day going over in your mind what happened that day and consider what went well and where you fell short, an examination of your conscience. As we draw to the end of the year it is a good time to consider how we are doing in our relationship with God and in the relationships we have with others close to us. Maybe there is some confessing we need to make. Maybe we need to turn back toward God. Maybe there are people in our lives we need to turn back toward.

When the prodigal son stopped and took stock of his life, the mess he had made of things, it dawned on him that his life would be much better if he was back home with his father. So he decided to turn back toward home. He still had his baggage. His world was still a mess. But he believed it would be better for him if he was back home with his father. As we stop and take stock of our lives, and the mess of the world in which we live, something we all have had a small hand in creating, we do this now in the season of Advent, the time when we prepare to celebrate again the birth of Jesus. Now is the time for us, as the prodigal son, to take stock of our lives, to remember that we belong to God, whose love for us is relentless, in spite of the mess we have made. Now is the time for us to turn back toward home.