

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON**

### **First Sunday of Advent**

**November 29, 2020**

#### **Psalm 80:1–7 (ESV):**

- 1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock.  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.
- 2 Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,  
stir up your might  
and come to save us!
- 3 Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved!
- 4 O LORD God of hosts,  
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
- 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
- 6 You make us an object of contention for our neighbors,  
and our enemies laugh among themselves.
- 7 Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved!

#### **First Reading: Isaiah 64:1–9 (ESV):**

1. Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains might quake at your presence—
- 2 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!

3 When you did awesome things that we did not look for,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

4 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.

5 You 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?

6 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.

7 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.

8 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.

9 Be not so terribly angry, O LORD,  
and remember not iniquity forever.  
Behold, please look, we are all your people.

**EPISTLE: 1 Corinthians 1:3–9 (ESV):**

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Thanksgiving**

4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you  
in Christ Jesus, 5 that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all  
knowledge— 6 even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— 7 so that

you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

### **THE GOSPEL - Mark 11:1–10; Mark 13:24–37 (ESV):**

#### **The Triumphal Entry**

**11** Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples **2** and said to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. **3** If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.’ ” **4** And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. **5** And some of those standing there said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” **6** And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go. **7** And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. **8** And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. **9** And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! **10** Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!”

#### **Mark 13:24–37 (ESV):**

#### **The Coming of the Son of Man**

**24** “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, **25** and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. **26** And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. **27** And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

## **The Lesson of the Fig Tree**

**28** “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. **29** So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. **30** Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. **31** Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

## **No One Knows That Day or Hour**

**32** “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. **33** Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. **34** It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. **35** Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— **36** lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. **37** And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”

## **Sermon 46 – First Sunday of Advent**

### **“Rip and Tear”**

#### **Isaiah 64:1-9**

Dear friends,

Isaiah speaks timeless words here near the end of his heavingly large book. He records the lament of the people of God throughout the ages, and that's why it is timeless. God's people have been put through trying circumstances before, God's people have been tied up with immoral nations before, and God's people have been themselves immoral before. We've all been here, personally and as a church. Isaiah not only reminds us of this, but the bursting hope and uncertain despair that this in-between state evokes in us. God isn't ignorant of this, and He doesn't take it

lightly, but He still does it. Sometimes He does it to evoke this very response. Sometimes He does it for other reasons. Which is this? Which are we? Well, let's see.

Isaiah wrote as Israel was bleeding from Assyrian invasion. The Assyrians were not nice, and they were not nice to Israel, and before long both kingdoms would suffer from their singularly destructive touch. The Assyrians didn't just fight Israel or conquer them, they displaced them. They would grab up villages and split them between several different cities in different parts of their domains. If you lived in this time, after the Assyrians came, Grandma might be living several hundred miles away, Dad might be several hundred miles in the other direction, and the kids might be scattered across half a timezone. They took "divide and conquer" quite literally, and thought that the best way to secure their conquests was making sure that each nation they conquered was scattered. Ironically, the company that owned the Soudan Iron Mine in Minnesota did the exact same thing for the exact same reasons. They would make sure all their immigrant workers were in mixed teams, most of the time they didn't even speak the same language, in order to avoid them unionizing. The Assyrians did it to ensure that no one rebelled. It's hard to conspire with your village when you can't talk to them and don't trust them. This is where the Samaritans came from.

So everybody is getting relocated, people are dying, and the nation is gasping for breath. Into this, Isaiah writes these words: **"Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence 2 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!”** I love how visceral and forceful this sounds. Rip open the heavens, Lord. Let the mountains quake. Let the earth shake. Make your name known, that the nations might tremble. Especially Assyria, because they're making us tremble. Isaiah calls on God's history, and He calls on it for action in the present time. You used to do things like this, God, Isaiah says, do it again. Tear open the sky and melt the mountains and just come in all your fury, because that's what we need. We need something big, something bold, something catastrophic, to really make this work out well. **“3 When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 4 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.”** Even when God's people weren't looking for God to save them, God still came down. God is God in service to His people, sometimes because of His people, and sometimes in spite of them, which is what Isaiah is going to talk about next.

Isaiah recounts God's dependability and faithfulness, one who doesn't turn away from His people. Isaiah talks a fair bit about waiting for God to do this, that this is one of the things that makes God's people. Christians are a lot of things, but to Isaiah, Christians are people who wait for God. They are people who need God and have that need met when God decides. I find great comfort in this. Waiting is a state of tension, it is a vacuum that seems to have no stability in itself. Waiting always tries to morph into something else. We want action, we want decision, we want change, or we want to know things will stay the same. In-betweens like waiting are inherently dissatisfying, in a deep instinctive way. Imagine standing in line for years. It'd be awful. That's the sense you get from Isaiah's words. Israel has been queing for years and God just won't move the line along. He won't send you

home, either. He just keeps you on hold. To us, this is unnatural, it's offensive, unsettling, sometimes deeply hurtful to be strung along like this. Teased by promises. Waiting for the word go, tense and coiled, ready to spring, but the starter pistol never sounds. God reminds us that part of this is natural to a Christian. It is something God's people are intimately familiar with, and throughout this whole pandemic I personally have been striving to see the value of waiting. I see its tension, I can feel running through me, but every fibre of my body rebels against this. Maybe you're the same way. Either with the virus, the politics, or something personal to you, being kept hanging by God is excruciating at times. Isaiah tells us this isn't wrong. It's God. It's God doing work. My immediate response to that is waiting is not work, waiting gets in the way of work. Isaiah says, nope. Waiting is the goal. Waiting is the point.

Why? Because God, that's why. We run the race of life at the pace that God sets out, and that is that. It is not necessarily God reminding us who's in control, sometimes it is but not always. It is quite simply that God knows when to hold, when to fold. God knows when to go, when to stay. God knows when its time to rest, and when its time to sprint. So much of our life God leaves to our hands, but the currents and the rhythms of it, the circumstances, aren't. That can be maddening. We want to do. We want to do good things. God says, hold on. It ain't ready yet. Wait for the go. So we wait a while, then we see it start to fall apart, we see how we could go and do, and we start rattling the cage, kicking our feet, wondering when we get to go. Wondering where God's will takes us. Wondering why He just wants us to sit.

Isaiah continues with how this must come across, because of who we are. **“5 You 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? 6 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.”** Sin, that old curse, coming up again. Sin is not always the reason God makes us wait. Sin is always the reason, though, that God tears up the heavens, melts the mountains, and moves. Sin makes God move, and when He moves, He moves to punish. That is bad for us, sinners as we are, and Isaiah reminds us that sometimes we're stuck because we stuck ourselves in it, knee-deep in it. This was the case for Israel in Isaiah's time. Assyria came at them because God sent them, He makes that abundantly clear. It's hard to say that civil strife and pandemic is a direct judgment of God. Perhaps it is just the side-effect of our sins, collectively, as a nation. It's easy to bristle at talk like that, we Christians have tried to be good to our neighbor, but it is a sobering reminder that we don't always succeed at that. Especially when we try to do things together, so much sin comes into it that it becomes almost impossible to untangle. Echo Isaiah's humility here. We are all impatient. This is Advent, the season of impatience. The season of “about to happen.” The season of “Christmas is coming, the year is turning.” Take time in the midst of this to remember, I don't deserve anything. I deserve death and hell. My righteousness is worthless to God. Only His righteousness matters.

Christ has given us that righteousness, thanks be to God, but Christ has also given us a God who will rip open the heavens to save His people. We don't know what God will do, but we know what God has done, and that gives us hope.



It gives us confidence to ask God to do it again, and that is what I call upon you to do this Advent season. Two thousand years ago God opened the heavens and sent a baby to change history. Throughout those two thousand years, God has continued to save His people. He has continued to give them His words, His faith, and His love. He continues to give you everything He offers, and that is all you need. God will never forsake the needs of His people, even while He holds in you in uneasy tension, making you feel every moment of waiting. He knows you worry, He knows you despair sometimes, that God might never move. He knows the devil is playing with you, whispering all sorts of things to you about what might happen. He knows these things matter.

**“7 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. 8 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. 9 Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people.”** You are that people. You are His work, and He loves His work. He loves what He's done with you. He loves the faith that He's nurtured in you, He delights in the good works that flow from you. He loves what He's about to do. That is what we trust. Love in waiting. Waiting in love. Melting in God's hands is something we all have to do, because we're sinners. But that doesn't change these words.

Advent is upon us. God is coming. Ask Him to hurry up. Ask Him to return and judge the world. Ask Him to lift the pandemic from us. Ask Him for mercy with your health, your family. The coming God is the God who is content to wait,

but only for a while. We're fixated on rescue, and He's not blind to that, but by waiting we see that rescue isn't the point. The point is that we're made His people. So ask. Then ask for the wisdom to see the work in the wait. Rip and tear, O God, until it is done, but until you do, give me the eyes to see Your good work in all things.

Amen.