

First Sunday in Advent

Text: Isaiah 64:1-9

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.

Theme: How Then Can we Be Saved?

This time of year is a season of anticipation and hope, but that seems to be strange. The days are getting darker. The weather is getting colder. The immorality of our time seems to be increasing. Our hearts are hardening against God, just as Isaiah lamented in his time. When they see the trouble around us and feel the burden of our own sins, we want to ask like Isaiah, “How then can we be saved?”

I. It is clear that our works cannot save us.

If we want to earn God’s favor, we need to be absolutely perfect. Verse 5 says, “*You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember Your ways. But when we continued to sin against*

them you were angry. How then can we be saved?" In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, *"Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."* (Mt 5:20) Then He goes on to show how perfect we need to be and ends that part of His sermon with these words, *"Be perfect, therefore, as Your heavenly Father is perfect."* (Mt 5:48) We have to love Him above all things and everyone else as much as ourselves. We even have to do so gladly.

Consider some of the ways that we are wandering from our Lord today. For decades people have complained about how commercial Christmas has become. In the 1930's Santa Claus and Rudolf increased in popularity so that stores could make more money. But today the word Christmas is becoming taken out of our English language. In one of my December newsletter articles I wrote that Christmas has become the holiday, which cannot be name, similar to how Lord Voldemort is "he who shall not be named" in the Harry Potter movies. A couple of years ago I was even told by the management of a store that they had forbidden their employees to wish people a "Merry Christmas" on Christmas Eve. While every other holiday can be mentioned by name, there is an increasing discomfort about calling Christmas by name.

But there are so many other ways that we are wandering from our Lord and His Ways. Who even cares about the 10 Commandments today. So many people lie, steal, and take advantage of people to get what they want. Even though the Bible calls on us to keep the marriage bed pure, our Lord original plan of marriage is barely visible in our world today. How many husbands and wives see themselves as a whole? How many young people even aspire to marriage, look for a Christian spouse or wait until marriage before engaging in relations. People find many other things to occupy their Sunday mornings. The entire moral fabric of our society is changing right before our eyes. We can look at each of the commandments and see how we are drifted further from God and His ways. Consider the language people use, how disrespectful people are of those in authority, how we mistreat one another. To be honest, our country doesn't deserve God's help. We often say, "God bless America," while at the same time, America pays little attention to God and His ways.

Every one of us is guilty. Isaiah was a great prophet of the Lord. He was a man of God. Yet, he doesn't complain about the sins of the other people. He realized that he was a sinner who needed forgiveness too. He doesn't ask, "Why, O Lord, do You make them wander from Your ways and harden their hearts?" He asks, *"Why, O Lord, do You make **us** wander from Your ways and harden **our** hearts so that **we** do not revere You?"* He doesn't say, "All of them have become like one who is unclean, and all their righteous acts are like filthy rags." He confesses, *"All of **us** have become like one who is unclean, and all **our** righteous acts are like filthy rags."*

That is a great example for us. It is tempting to see the sins of other people and to blame them for the immorality in our society today. But we all have to confess that we have wandered from God and His ways. There have been times when our hearts have been hard. Even our best deeds have been tainted with sin. Isaiah teaches us that we cannot save ourselves. None of us is perfect. We are all to blame for the sin around us.

II. Our hope is that God will forgive our sins.

Isaiah prayed that God would rend the heavens and come down. He remember how God helped His

people in the past. He opened the Red Sea. He appeared to them at Mount Sinai. Throughout Israel's history God came to the aid of His people. In this section of his book, Isaiah looks forward to the Babylonian Captivity of God's people. Isaiah prays that God will deliver them again. That prayer is captured in our Advent hymn,

**O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appears.
Rejoice, rejoice, Emanuel shall come to Thee, O Israel.**

God's people looked forward to the time when God would come and bring forgiveness and salvation.

That prayer was answered when Jesus came the first time. When Jesus was born all of heaven rejoiced. When He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the crowds shouted, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." We are saved not because we are so good and perfect, but because God has been merciful to us. Jesus Christ came into this world to redeem us from our sins. God has rent the heavens and come down. He took on our flesh. He suffered for our sins. He has acted on our behalf by cleansing us from our sins and clothing us with His righteousness. We are not saved by our deeds, but faith that Jesus Christ gave His innocent life for the forgiveness of all of my sins.

That prayer will be completely answered when Jesus comes again. He will rend the heavens and come down in glory. He will raise our bodies, and they will be glorified. He will save us from all of the evils of this life. We will be perfect, and everything around us will be perfect. There will be no more suffering, mourning or sin. Those things will be gone forever, and we will be with the Lord. We can never completely get suffering out of this world, but the day that Jesus returns, He will deliver us from every evil. There will be no more evil for those who trusted in Him.

How then can we be saved? The point of this text is that we cannot save ourselves. Even our righteous acts are like filthy rags. That is why we need the coming of the Lord. We thank God that He has rent the heavens and come to this earth to redeem us from our sins, and we look forward to the day when the heavens will be rent once and for all when Jesus will return and take us to be with Him in His glory forever.

Amen.

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