

The Hidden God

Text: Isaiah 64:1-9

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 (Series B 1st Sunday in Advent) Ps. 80:1-7, 17-19

Mark 13:24-37

"...that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down." (Isaiah 64:1)

Prayer

The evidence of God's goodness and His presence had been rather thin in Israel of late. Israel's enemies to the north were having their way, and God seemed to be staying out of the way. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." Come down to save us. Come down to deliver us. Come down to free us. Come down and do something to save us. God seemed to be playing hide and seek with His people. Come down, come down, wherever you are.

God was hidden. "You have hidden your face from us and delivered us into the hand of our iniquities." That is how God deals with sinners, the two-fold way of the Law and the Gospel that Israel experienced and Isaiah. Before God reveals Himself to us in mercy, He first hides Himself in wrath.

Before God shows Himself to be our Defender and Redeemer, He turns us over to our enemies and lets them trample over us. Before He forgives our sin, He gives us over to sin. Before He opens the kingdom of heaven to us, He lets us experience hell.

Before He raises us from the dead, He gives us over to death and lets death have its way with us. Before the open, empty tomb of Easter Sunday, there is the bloody cross of Good Friday - not only for Christ, but for all who are baptized into His death and resurrection.

Isaiah was troubled by this. He had some questions to ask of this God who had gone into seclusion, this *"hidden God."* Why had the people, who were God's chosen people, turned away from God? Why did Israel reject the word of God? *"O Lord, why dost thou make us err from thy ways and harden our heart, so that we fear thee not?"* Those are logical questions to ask.

If faith is God's gift and if God preserves us in faith, then unbelief and the hardening of our hearts must be God's doing too, right? Why are some saved and not others? Why do some cling to their baptisms and others reject it? Why do some catechumens cling to the Word and sacraments in which they have been taught while others turn away from him in unbelief?

Calvinism is able to supply a logical answer. It's God's doing. Faith and unbelief, salvation and damnation are all God's doing because He is sovereign and the buck stops with Him. The prophet Isaiah asks, "Why, O Lord, do you make us wander from your ways?" (as if sin were God's fault).

We all have many *why questions* to ask God ourselves. "Why do bad things happen to good people?" was a popular question several years ago and still is today, among those who have bad things happen to them.

Some would say that God was all loving, but He wasn't all powerful. God would love to do something but He just doesn't have the power to prevent every little bad thing from happening. He just doesn't have his finger on every button.

Still some would say with a certain measure of comfort to some people, as long as you don't think about it too long. God is love, and God doesn't want planes to crash and babies to die but He can't stop those things from happening. While it may be nice to know that God is love, if He doesn't have the power to act on that love, He isn't much of a God, and there surely isn't much comfort in a loving but powerless God, is there?

You see, when you and I moralize with God, that's what we get: A powerless God of love or a loveless God of power. But if God is both powerful and loving, then He is "immoral" for not exercising that power and the most "immoral" thing He ever did was hang an innocent Jew on a cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Why does God permit the famines in Africa and the political corruptions that keep people from getting their food in due season? Why does God permit cancers and coronaries, disease, destruction, COVID-19 and death? Why does God put up with injustice, racism, violence, and evil in the world? Why did He permit six million Jews to be systematically killed in Nazi Germany? Why does He allow millions of unborn babies be systematically killed in North America? Why doesn't He just come down right now and clean the mess up?

Little children like to play the "why" game with their parents. "Don't play in the street." "Why?" "Because you might get hit." "Why?" "Because a driver might not see you?" "Why?" "Because you're short." "Why?" "Because you're a child." "Why?" "Because I'm your parent and I say so, and if you ask 'why' one more time, you're not going out to play at all." "OK."

We have "why" questions aplenty for God. And when people ask them of us, we become tongue-tied and defensive. The God who has gone into hiding is a tough God to defend, but we try ever so hard to defend Him.

We need to learn with the prophet Isaiah that the "why" question is out of bounds and unanswerable. We must put our finger to our lips and be silent where God has not given us anything to say. It is not the place of the clay to question the Potter. It is not the place of the creature to judge the Creator. It is not the place of the redeemed to question the judgment of their Redeemer.

To ask "why" of God is to call God's profound judgments into judgment and so to bring judgment upon ourselves. It is to make God answerable and accountable to us, to make ourselves lords and judges over God, to be gods over God. It is to hold God responsible for our evil and sin and unbelief.

If someone has to be at fault, let it be God; surely not us. When we ask for explanations, we are accusing God of making a mistake, of bad judgment, of powerlessness, lovelessness, and failure. The "why" question lays a moral judgment on God. God is not behaving morally, and we want to know why.

To ask "why" questions of God is to deal with the hidden God or, as Luther called him, the "naked God." That is the God whose presence causes the mountains to quake, the God who comes as a fire put to dry kindling, a fire that sets water boiling. The hidden God is the God who strikes fear among the nations and terror in the hearts of people.

Like the prophet Isaiah, we would call down the hidden God from heaven to deal with the situations in this world. "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down" and clean up our streets and our communities, rid the world of evil and vice, straighten out our sicknesses and wipe out everything that threatens our lives and offends our sense of justice and morality.

But what would become of us if that God would come out of hiding? Would we be able to stand in the presence of this hidden God? Remember what Isaiah said; this is the God who works for those who wait for Him and who joyfully meets the one who works righteousness. With what *righteous works* would you greet this hidden God,

- who causes even the mountains to shake in their boots?
- With your use of God's name? Your devotion to His Word?
- With your honor, love, and obedience of parents, pastors, authorities, teachers, and bosses, and all whom God has placed over you?
- With your care and concern for your neighbour's needs, his property, his name and his reputation?

If God tore open the heavens and came down to wipe out sin and evil from the world, what would prevent him from wiping us out first? Isaiah rightly confessed, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our so-called '*righteous deeds*' are like soiled and stained rags."

Isaiah literally calls our righteous works "*filthy cloths*" in God's eyes. In the presence of the hidden God, we are like leaves in the fall; we dry up and wither, and His breath blows us away. And so, we best be careful when we lay the "why" questions on God, lest we be blown away like a dry leaf on a windy day in early November.

There are no answers to the "why" questions. Jesus didn't get an answer to his "why" question, when He cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We know why. It was because He was made sin for us, though He knew no sin, so that, in Him, we might become the righteousness of God.

"O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down." God did come down. He tore open the heavens and came down to us but not quite in the manner Isaiah had in mind. "He came down from heaven and was conceived by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man."

He came down much lower than Isaiah expected. God came down, not as the hidden God of power but as the God of the manger and the cross. He came down to be with us, to be one of us and one with us, to be joined with us in our humanity. He came down as the God who breaths and bleeds and sweats and dies.

God came down to us in the Child of Bethlehem, the obedient son of Mary, the poor carpenter of Nazareth, the wandering preacher of Galilee, the beggar King on a borrowed donkey, the crucified King of Calvary.

When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the heavens were torn open, and the Spirit descended upon Jesus, and the voice of the Father testified that this man was His beloved Servant-Son. And we were to look for no other God but this One - God's Son, Mary's Son. To look for

God anywhere else but in this man, Jesus is to look for the hidden God who will not be found, and should He be found, would destroy us.

When Jesus hung on the cross, the curtain of the Jerusalem temple was rent, torn in two from top to bottom as the heavens were torn at His baptism. That indicated that the dividing wall between God and man had come down. Sinful man and a holy God were again at peace, brought together in the God-man, Jesus Christ.

God and man were reconciled in the death of the God-man on the cross. The foremost creature was again at peace with the Creator. The mud was reconciled to the Potter, in the perfect vessel named Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus lived the life of the Son perfectly, so that baptized into Him, we may call God "our Father" with delight as His children. Jesus gladly did the righteous works the Law requires. He obediently did the Father's will where we would not and could not. He died our death. His clay was crushed in our place.

His was raised from the dead for us. He sits at the right hand of the Father, enthroned in heavenly majesty to lord His death and resurrection over all things for us. The Father delighted in His Son, and through His Son, He delights also in you and me as His children.

Today is the first of four Sundays in the season of Advent. Advent means "coming." Advent is not so much a countdown to the coming of Christmas (we already have more than enough of that!) as it is a time to ponder and prepare for the visible coming of Jesus in His glory.

Then, once again, the heavens will be torn open, and the One whom we do not now see will be seen in glory. When? That's like the question "why?" Don't ask. You don't need to know. "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Mark 13:32)

And if even the Son did not know the day of His Second Advent, how can we ever presume to know? We don't know when the heavens will be torn open for the final time. It could happen in the evening, at midnight, at dawn, in the morning. But we do know who it is that will be coming down; The One who came down. The One who comes down to us here and now in the Liturgy of His Word and His Supper, Jesus; He will come down to bring us up, to raise up all the dead and to give eternal life to all who trust in Him.

Until that Day, whenever that day may come, we work and we watch, leaving the "why" and the "when" questions to our gracious Father in heaven. We work at the tasks we have been given by God to do as parents, workers, parishioners, and citizens - "Each having his or her own task."

And we watch for Jesus' coming. We work and watch with confidence, knowing that He who will rend the heavens and come down as He who rent the heavens and came down to die for us. He comes to save us.

Stir up, we implore you, your power, O Lord, and come that by your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and be saved by your mighty deliverance; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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