

THE COMING LORD: THE LONGING FOR HIS COMING
Advent B1 – Isa 64:1-9; Ps 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37
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Happy New Year! No, I have not lost track of time. I realize that today is December 1st, not January 1st. Today is, however, the beginning of “the liturgical year” for western Christianity. Now, what do I mean by “the liturgical year”? For those religious bodies that follow the lectionary for their liturgy—that is, their worship—today is the first Sunday for a new year of worship. What is a “lectionary”? A lectionary is an arrangement of Scripture selections intended for proclamation during the worship service. The common lectionaries follow the calendar of the church’s year, which year begins today with the “Season of Advent”? And what is the “Season of Advent”? The word “advent” means “coming” or “arrival,” and the “Season of Advent” refers to this time of year when preparation is made to commemorate Christ’s first coming and to anticipate His second coming.

For those of you who, like myself, know of no other religious tradition than that of the Churches of Christ, I may sound like I am speaking a foreign language. “Liturgy,” “lectionary,” “calendar of the church year,” and “Season of Advent” were not—and probably for many are still not—a part of our religious vocabulary. We do not have a “worship liturgy”; we have an “order of worship.” We do not use “lectionaries”; we subscribe to *Power for Today* and other devotional materials that guide us through Scripture in a systematic fashion. We do have a “church calendar”—just try to tamper with the potluck schedule in a typical Church of Christ! And although we do not speak of “advents,” we do believe that Christ has come and is coming. I am not suggesting that we adopt the terminology of the religious world. I am suggesting that we acquaint ourselves with it so that we can carry-on a conversation with our religious neighbors.

Having said all of that, from today through the first Sunday in January, I want us to consider Christ who has come and who is coming.

Contrary to what we may expect, we begin not on a note of joy, we begin on a note of despair. Let us read from Isa 64:1-9.

¹Oh, that you would burst from the heavens and come down! How the mountains would quake in your presence! ²As fire causes wood to burn and water to boil, your coming would make the nations tremble. Then your enemies would learn the reason for your fame! ³When you came down long ago, you did awesome things beyond our highest expectations. And oh, how the mountains quaked! ⁴For since the world began, no ear has heard, and no eye has seen a God like you, who works for those who wait for him! ⁵You welcome those who cheerfully do good, who follow godly ways.

But we are not godly. We are constant sinners, so your anger is heavy on us. How can people like us be saved? ⁶We are all infected and impure with sin. When we proudly display our righteous deeds, we find they are but filthy rags. Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall. And our sins, like the wind, sweep us away. ⁷Yet no one calls on your name or pleads with you for mercy. Therefore, you have turned away from us and turned us over to our sins.

⁸And yet, LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter. We are all formed by your hand. ⁹Oh, don't be so angry with us, LORD. Please don't remember our sins forever. Look at us, we pray, and see that we are all your people (NLT).

These verses are a prayer to God by a people who are powerless and under oppression.

The prayer proclaims the heart of the hope in the God who comes to our rescue. First, in vv. 1-4, there is a *cry of desperation*. Next, in vv. 5-7, there is a *conviction of sin*.

Finally, in vv. 8-9, there is a *confidence that God will act*.

The prayer begins with a petition, pleading with God to “come down” from the heavens in majesty and might. God is asked to burst forth from His home and break into the home of humans. This invasion into our world will be awfully awesome! The purpose of the coming God is to assert His name and His sovereignty so as to overpower the destructiveness of the nations. The yearning of Israel is that the LORD God should show the nations who is in charge, for the nations have assumed that they themselves—or their gods—are in charge and can do what they want in abuse of Israel. In v. 3, the prayer connects the hoped-for intervention to the remembrance of past interventions. The verb “come down” echoes the Exodus (Exod 3:8) and the quaking mountain of Sinai (Exod 19:16-18). Israel cries out to God as “The One Who Comes,” and their cry recalls when God came to deliver them from Egyptian bondage and when God came to deliver to them

His covenant. God, He is the one who comes to rescue, and Israel pleads with Him to do in the present what He has done in the past.

In v. 5, the prayer abruptly changes tone. Now the prayer lowers its voice and utters a confession of guilt. Israel has sinned and transgressed, is unclean and filthy. Whereas in vv. 1-4 Israel expects and insists on God's coming, in vv. 5-7 Israel expresses why God cannot and will not come into such uncleanness. It is Israel's own fault that God fails to do what they fervently want Him to do. Personally, I find this relationship between yearning and failure to be relevant for our day. For me, open and honest prayer is a struggle because I bounce between desire and defeat: I cry out for God's blessing while at the same time I confess that I do not deserve it. And, as we will see in Israel's prayer, the basis for such prayer is not *who* I am but *whose* I am.

In v. 8, Israel speaks three staggering statements to the LORD: You are our Father; You are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. In these two images of father and potter, Israel affirms, "You made us, You own us, You are responsible for us, we belong to You." We are Your responsibility, Your burden, Your problem, Your treasured possession. You have begotten us and You have formed us. Israel's *deep trust* in the LORD God is matched by the LORD God's *deep obligation* to Israel. The statements of v. 8 provide the basis for the passionate petition of v. 9, which is now more intense and more intimate than the petition of v. 1: "Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people" (NRSV). The prayer for God's coming, which began in powerful pronouncements, ends in passionate pleadings. God's coming in majesty and might must also be a coming in mercy, or we are without hope.

Israel lived between the multiple comings of God: He had come and they hoped He would come. The church, the Israel of God, lives between the first coming of God in Christ and the future, final coming of God in Christ. As Christians, we live between advents—we live in the in-between time. In my preparation of this sermon, I thought of the sports analogy of halftime—we live during halftime. But there are two serious shortcomings of this analogy. First, since we live between time and eternity, the second half is infinitely longer than the first half. Second, during halftime the game is *not* being played, which is precisely *not* the case for the Christian life. We are battling in the game

now; and in the second half, we will celebrate our victory. Therefore, since the halftime analogy is such a poor analogy, “the jury will disregard these remarks”! Enough silliness; let us consider what it means to live during the in-between time. Turn, please, to 1 Cor 1:1-9 and let us read.

¹This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Sosthenes.

²We are writing to the church of God in Corinth, you who have been called by God to be his own holy people. He made you holy by means of Christ Jesus, just as he did all Christians everywhere— whoever calls upon the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and theirs.

³May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you his grace and peace.

⁴I can never stop thanking God for all the generous gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. ⁵He has enriched your church with the gifts of eloquence and every kind of knowledge. ⁶This shows that what I told you about Christ is true. ⁷Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will keep you strong right up to the end, and he will keep you free from all blame on the great day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns. ⁹God will surely do this for you, for he always does just what he says, and he is the one who invited into this wonderful friendship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (NLT).

At first glance it may not be apparent, but these words of greeting from the pen of Paul are dripping with sarcasm and cunning wit. Paul makes it clear in v. 1 that he himself has been “*called* to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” Then he says in v. 2 that the church of Corinth (the *ekklēsia*, or “*called-out ones*”) is made up of holy people who, along with everyone else who *calls* on the name of Jesus, are “*called to be holy*.” The Corinthians are doubly called to be doubly holy even as they themselves call on the name of Jesus Christ. Paul returns to this notion of calling in v. 9 when he makes it clear that the Corinthians have been “*called into fellowship with [God’s] Son Jesus*.” Why all this talk of holy calling? Perhaps because the Corinthians were such an *unholy* mess! They were divided over whether to follow Paul or Apollos or Peter or Jesus. They were hauling each other into court with lawsuits, arguing about marriage and food sacrifices to idols, making a mockery of the Lord’s Supper, and some were denying the resurrection. God Himself had *called* them to be different, to be distinct, to be holy. But holy-acting they were not. Paul’s salutation seems to be a subtle way of reminding the Corinthians just *who* it was who had called them and *what* the goal of that divine calling was. As we saw in the Isaiah text, the basis for our praying is not *who* we are but *whose* we are, so

should be the basis for our living: our *calling* is to be holy because of *who* has called us and because of *whose* we are.

These words from Paul's letter affirm that *our present life is lived between advents*. The time between advents is a time of transition, full of unknowns and uncertainties. It is likely that the original readers denied their in-betweenness and presumed that they had already reached the end of the tunnel. They had "arrived," as we say, and interpreted their spiritual gifts as proof of their full salvation (see 1 Cor 4:8). Paul therefore continually keeps before them the Christ who has not yet returned and concludes the letter with the prayer "Our Lord, come!" (1 Cor 16:22b). For others trapped in the turmoil of their own circumstances, there is a need for reassurance about the future, a rehearing of God's promise of the Second Advent, the Second Coming. They have denied their in-betweenness by denying the future. They need to discover again that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Paul also affirms that *God's gifts are more than sufficient for the in-between times*. The God who calls us is the God who sustains us. God, through His Spirit, supplies the strength we need to live faithfully to our calling in the time between Christ's comings. Finally, Paul appeals to his readers—and through them to us—that *in the in-between time they must live in unity with one another*. The lavish spiritual gifts given to the Corinthians are not merely for the personal enrichment of the ones who possess them; they are to lead to a common cause, to a community united in purpose and practice. Not only do we need the power of God, we also need the people of God if we are to survive the in-between times.

It is the Season of Advent, and I suggest that we enter into it with repentance, expectation, and hope. God in Christ has come, and this coming as a babe born in Bethlehem was not because we were deserving but because we were desperate. May we remember that God sent us a Savior because we are sinners. May we remember that God has called us to be holy as He is holy. It is only by God's amazing grace in the awesome gift of His Son that we who are wholly sinners are transformed into holy saints. And may we remember that our hope lies in a redeeming God who continually comes to our rescue. That is the reason for the season. Let us pray.

O LORD God, we pray that You would tear open the heavens and come down to save us. For we have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy rag.

O LORD, You are our Father; You are the potter and we are the clay: shape us, sustain us, save us. Please, do not remain angry or remember our sins forever. Remember, O LORD, that we are Your possession, we are Your people.

O LORD, make us holy as You are holy. And LORD, unite us and make us one as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one. Strengthen us to the very end, so that we may be found faithful on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

O Lord, come! Come quickly and come in majesty, might, and mercy. We call upon the name of Jesus, Amen.

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