

ADVENT 2023

Part 1: “Rend the Heavens”

Isaiah 64:1–9

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Sunday, December 3, 2023 (The First Sunday of Advent)

Sermon Summary

In this sermon, we embark on a thought-provoking journey through Isaiah 64, a passage that is an ancient prayer for divine intervention amid a sin-fractured world. Explore Isaiah's surprising and desperate plea for God to "rend the heavens," illuminating the profound truths of Advent—our world's cry for divine mercy, the insufficiency of human righteousness, and the transformative hope discovered in yielding to the hands of the potter.

Scripture Reading

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— 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! When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 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. 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? 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. 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. 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. Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people” (Isaiah 64:1–9, ESV).

Prayer

ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. *Amen.*¹

Introduction

Our Scripture reading today comes from the sixty-fourth chapter of Isaiah. It is the Old Testament reading from the common lectionary of the church for the first Sunday of Advent season.

At its heart, this passage of Isaiah is a prayer. And I have to say, if you pay close attention to what Isaiah asks for and what it admits, it is quite an odd and surprising prayer.

Isaiah cries out to God to *rend the heavens*. Look again at the first two verses, “*Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— 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!*” (Isa 64:1–2).

The prophet is petitioning for a dramatic and even cataclysmic change. But it is not a gradual or casual change he longs for. He is petitioning the Lord for upheaval. The images he uses are of calamity: a wildfire, an earthquake, boiling water, and the *rending* of the heavens.

Now, we don’t typically use the word “rend” in everyday conversation. Merriam-Webster defines the word “rend” as a verb that means “to remove from place by violence or to tear apart into pieces.” Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the word translated in verse 1 as “rend” קָרַע (*qā·rā`*) is primarily used when describing a person tearing their garments in grief.

In fact, in ancient Jewish society, when someone was confronted with bad news, when a loved one died, or when a great evil took place, it was common for people to forcibly tear and ruin their clothing to express the magnitude of their sorrow and outrage.

But Isaiah feels more than just personal grief and rage. His pain is cosmic in scale. He mourns for a brokenness and a suffering so severe that a torn garment will not suffice.

¹ The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 90.

He cries out to God that he might rend the heavens—that the skies and the stars themselves would be torn asunder!

What leads a prophet of God to pray this violent prayer?

As we will discover, Isaiah's prayer is for nothing less than the intrusion of God into our sin-fractured world. It's a prayer for a dramatic breaking in of light into darkness. It is a prayer for arrival—and that is what the season of Advent is all about.

Advent is not a season of sentimentality but a season of desperate yearning. It is a season in which we acknowledge the brokenness of the world so that we might awaken our hope for the wholeness and healing that only the coming of Christ and his kingdom can bring.

So, for the rest of our time, we will briefly explore this passage of Isaiah and unfold three essential truths that lay at the heart of Advent season: *1.) Our broken world needs divine intervention, 2.) Our best righteous deeds are not enough to save us, and 3.) Our only hope is the mercy of God.*

Exposition

1.) Our broken world needs divine intervention

There's an old English nursery rhyme that goes, "Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. And all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again." It's a silly but memorable rhyme that has one simple lesson: *sometimes things can break so severely—that despite our best efforts—there is nothing we can do to fix it.*

And deep in our bones, we know that this speaks to something that is true about the nature of our world. We might try to distract or sedate ourselves from fully acknowledging this uncomfortable truth, but something has gone terribly wrong. To quote William Butler Yeats, "*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*"

The Bible gives us an account of why this is the case. The book of Genesis tells us that God is our Creator, who spoke creation into existence. In the beginning, he masterfully made all things in a state of goodness and harmony, and he made humanity his image bearers to rule over the earth. But the perfection of paradise was shattered when our first parents rebelled against God, enslaved our race to sin, and plunged creation under the dominion of death. And ever since this ill-fated beginning, the sad story of human history has been a bloodstained tale.

This year, we have witnessed war continue to rage between Russia and Ukraine, and we have seen new violence erupt between Israel and Hamas. In these wars, thousands of innocents have suffered and died and lost their homes. Millions around the world have cried out for peace. But despite the billions of dollars spent and pressure from mighty

nations, we can't seem to bring the horror and hostility to an end. Despite our all our rational and scientific triumphs of the modern age, our world is locked in the same "*red-tooth and claw*" violence as it was in the ancient world.

The fault lines of that same brokenness fracture throughout our own nation and society, where perversion is often called progress, greed is called success, virtue is called weakness, and corruption and moral compromise are rewarded with power. All the while, our nation becomes more divided, more hostile, and more prone to hate. Our sin-fractured world is falling toward unhindered entropy, and like the old rhyme says, "all the king's horses and all the king's men" are not enough to stop it.

We need the dramatic divine intervention that Isaiah cries out for. We need God to rend the heavens and come down.

But the Bible also shows us that the problem with this world is not just *out there*—it is also in *here*. *Our sin* is why the world is fractured. Indeed, the broken world is only an outward symptom of our own brokenness.

As the Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once wrote, "*The line between good and evil runs not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart.*"

We need God to rend not only the heavens; we need him to rend the disordered loves of our hearts. We need him to liberate us from the secret sins that ensnare us and the patterns of thinking that imprison us.

With so much broken within us and in the world around us, it would be tempting to fall into despair and hopelessness. Yet, we are not without hope.

The God revealed by Holy Scripture is a God who intervenes. He is a Creator who enters into creation, into history, and into our very lives to bring restoration and redemption to the broken.

That's why, in this passage, Isaiah gives a subtle callback to the story of the Exodus. Exodus was, after all, the central story for the people of Israel. It was the ancient narrative that gave the people of God their very identity and sense of meaning in the world.

And Exodus begins in another seemingly hopeless situation. The people of Israel had been enslaved for generations by Egypt, the most powerful empire on the planet at the time. Yet, God came down and delivered his people with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

Isaiah remembers, "*When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 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. You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways” (Isa 64:3–5a).

The God Isaiah prays to is the God who once heard the cries of his people when they were in bondage. He is the God of the burning bush, the God who is the Great I Am, the God who shattered the power of Egypt’s false gods and the pride of Pharaoh. He is the God who split the Red Sea and led his people to a holy mountain, where he revealed his word and made the earth shake and tremble before the fire of his glory.

So, too, this is the God we can pray to and encounter and commune with. He is the God who continues to hear the cries of the broken, and save those who cannot save themselves.

Yet, like Isaiah, we must come to an end of ourselves. We must abandon all hope in our self-salvation projects. We must dispel the fantasies that if we can get enough money to be secure, enough success to be worthy, enough beauty to be loved, enough power to be in control, and enough comfort to be at peace, then we would be okay.

No, our salvation will not come from earth up; the Christian hope is in a salvation that comes from heaven down.

2.) Our best righteous deeds are not enough to save us

Scripture tells us that God dwells in undiminished glory. He is perfect, pure, and set apart, and no evil can dwell before him. Yet, this truth immediately poses a problem. For how can sinful people commune with a perfectly righteous God?

This is why Old Testament laws that you find in books like Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy talk about the ceremonies and sacrifices that needed to take place for people to worship before the presence of God. Many of these ancient laws focused on the need to be “clean.”

In the Old Testament, the concept of being "clean" was not just about physical hygiene. “Cleanness” also carried significant spiritual and ritual implications. The Mosaic law outlined various regulations regarding cleanliness and purity that distinguished between what was considered clean and what was unclean.

Leviticus, in particular, provides detailed instructions on purity and cleanliness. The Israelites were given specific guidelines on dietary laws, personal hygiene, and even regulations for dealing with skin diseases or bodily discharges. The purpose behind these laws was to emphasize the holiness of God and the need for a separated, consecrated people.

In fact, this is why in the ancient Tabernacle (or Temple), God’s holy presence was sealed off behind a veil in a room called the Most Holy Place. This veil of the temple in the Old Testament held great symbolic significance, representing the separation between God’s perfect holiness and his sin-stained people. This veil served as a barrier

that only the high priest could pass through and only once a year on the Day of Atonement (or Yom Kippur).

The requirements for the high priest to enter beyond the veil were stringent and highlighted the need for ceremonial cleanliness and ritual purity. The process involved various rituals outlined in Leviticus 16. Before entering the Holy of Holies, the high priest had to cleanse himself through ritual baths, wear sacred garments, and offer sacrifices for himself and the people. The meticulous observance of these rites emphasized the holiness of God and the unworthiness of human beings to approach Him without proper preparation.

Once the high priest had undergone these purification rituals, he could enter the Holy of Holies and stand before the Ark of the Covenant, make atonement for the sins of the people, and seek reconciliation with God.

But Isaiah tells us that no matter how many rituals we might observe, we persist in our sins. Indeed, Israel's own history was a downward spiral into idolatry and injustice, culminating in ruin and exile. And because of this inborn bent toward sin, we (left to ourselves) are unclean. The prophet writes, *"Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment"* (Isa 64:5–6a).

Isaiah is conveying that despite all Israel's efforts to adhere to the law and maintain ritual purity, we are all still inherently flawed and fall short of God's perfect standard. Even our best attempts at righteousness are insufficient and like unclean "polluted garments" in the eyes of God.

Now, oftentimes, we might try to pretend this is not the case. We may look to our best deeds and find hollow solace when we compare them to the worst deeds of others. But comparative justification does not hold weight in the court of heaven.

Like a green leaf that has been destined to wither when the coldness of autumn arrives, the power of sin has marked us for destruction. As Isaiah laments, *"...We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 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"* (Isa 64:6b–7).

But even despite the death of winter and the long dark nights of the year's end, hope is not lost. For every budding new life in spring bears witness to the promise of resurrection and the hope of mercy.

3.) Our only hope is the mercy of God

The final image of our Scripture reading is a picture of complete dependency and submission. Isaiah compares himself and the people of God to malleable clay that is at the complete mercy of the hands of a potter.

He prays, *“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. Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people”* (Isa 64:8–9).

Isaiah is saying that once we recognize the brokenness of the world and the brokenness in our own hearts, we must yield entirely to our Lord and God, who alone has the power to make all things new.

With humility and desperation, we must come before God and plead, “God, mold me! God, shape me! Form me, even if it requires pain and pressure and discomfort!”

Now, it must be said our yielding to God is not a passive process. Rather, it is a patient participation in the life of God, as his Spirit forms us to look more and more like his Son. Patient participation involves meditating on the truth of God's word. It involves communing with God through prayer and drawing close to God in times of worship. It means giving ourselves to spiritual practices like generosity and service. But in engaging all these means of grace, the Spirit of God is faithful to form and shape us to be more and more like who God has revealed himself to be in Jesus.

For we are not saved without a purpose. The potter has plans for his clay. God saves us and sanctifies us so that, as he sent Christ into this world, he might send us as well.

As Paul writes to Timothy in the New Testament, *“Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work”* (2 Tim 2:20–21).

Advent is a season in which we should invite God to prepare us for his coming and form us to be ambassadors for his kingdom. It is a season of yearning for God to redeem what is tarnished and restore what is broken. It is a season to place all of our hope in his mercy.

Conclusion

As we enter into this time of Advent, maybe you feel overwhelmed by the brokenness of the world. Maybe you have experienced heartache and pain this last year that seems irreparable. Maybe you feel unclean and disgusted with yourself, and Isaiah's words about “unclean garments” are all too relatable.

It's here that I like to remember Jesus's posture to those who were considered unclean. I think of a moment in Matthew 8 when a man who had leprosy approached Jesus and knelt before him (see Matt 8:1–4). In the first century, leprosy was a term that referred to a variety of chronic skin diseases. But no matter what his disease was, the man would have regardless been considered ceremonially unclean. He wasn't even allowed to touch

another person because, in touching them, he would have made the other person unclean.

He would have been outcast from society and barred from entering the temple and worshipping before the presence of God. That separation and isolation was meant to be a striking visual image of how sin is both a contamination and a contagion. It is something that separates us from God and one another. In of ourselves, we, like the leper, are unclean. Even our best attempts at righteousness are unclean and often defiled by selfish motives.

But nevertheless, the leper comes to Jesus. He kneels and trembles before the Lord and pleads, "*Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.*" And Jesus does something shocking. He stretches out his hand, and he touches the leper. He then tells him, "I will; be clean." And instantly, the man is cleansed.

The gospel of Matthew, the same gospel that tells us about this interaction between Jesus and the leper, also has some pretty interesting things to say about the veil of the temple that separated God's holy presence from his unclean people. Matthew tells us that the very moment that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, the earth quaked, and the veil was torn in two from top to bottom. In the old King James Version, it even says, "the veil of the temple was rent in twain" (Matt 27:51).

For it is because Jesus, the Son of God, lived the perfectly righteous life that we could have never lived and died the death we deserved, the barrier that once separated us from God has been removed.

Today, you need to hear this truth. Jesus's righteousness is greater than your greatest sin. His perfection is truer than your most shameful failure. His love is even more mighty than the power of death.

You can cry out to him, and he will hear you. You can come before him, and he will heal you. You can trust in him, for in his promise, there is hope.

The veil that was torn was not just a symbol of what God has done in the past. It is a sign that points to the future. For just as the veil of the temple was torn so too the heavens will be torn and the skies will be rolled back as a scroll (see: Rev 6:14). The once crucified now resurrected One will return. He will rend the heavens and come down, and we will dwell with him forever.

To long for that day is the hope of Advent.

AMEN.