

The First Sunday in Advent – December 3, 2023

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, Wisconsin

Isaiah 64:1-9 – WELCOME YOUR SAVIOR, KING

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! ²As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! ³For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. ⁴Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. ⁵You 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? ⁶All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. ⁷No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins. ⁸Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.

We are surrounded with seasons of gatherings and celebrations; of greetings and invitations sent and received. What a joy it is to welcome family and friends into our homes for meals and fellowship. What is the scene like when loved ones who live far away arrive at our door? Hugs and kisses; expressions of joy and a hearty welcome. That's what season of Advent is about! We are preparing to welcome our Savior and King as we celebrate his coming in humility. Those who welcomed him as a baby in Bethlehem were few. How different it will be when he comes to earth again, visible to all, accompanied by angels. We prepare every day to welcome him on that great day.

Isaiah's mission to the children of Israel was to prepare them to welcome their Savior and King. That was a deeply challenging mission for the great majority of the Israelites were not interested in honoring the Messiah promised for thousands of year. Their religious focus was on the Canaanite gods. The religious leaders were not carrying out their responsibilities in the temple. Political and family leadership was also failing in their responsibility of nurturing faith in the promised Messiah.

There is great value in listening to Isaiah for us. Even though we know the Savior and trust in him, we still have the capacity to turn away as the children of Israel did. So much in this world, especially at this time of year can draw our focus away from the meaning of Christmas and the real reason that we have all the celebrations that fill our time and energy. So as we listen to Isaiah this morning we are urged to

WELCOME OUR SAVIOR KING

- His power makes us tremble.
- His justice makes us despair.
- His mercy fills us with confidence.

Isaiah's opening prayer in this chapter amazes us. He asks that God would come down from heaven and make the mountains tremble. He wants the nations to remember the power of the Lord. His language is picturesque. He thinks of rapidly boiling water and the power of a fierce, driving, consuming forest fire. He reminds the people of their history; the plagues in Egypt; the crossing of the

Red Sea; the fire and lightning and shaking of Mt. Sinai. The Egyptians trembled at his power as did the Israelites. They sent Moses up Mt. Sinai to talk to God. They were too terrified to approach God's power.

God's power should still causes people to tremble. But today's people are not so easily impressed. Nations rise up with their own great power. Nations threaten other nations with military and fiscal threats. People resort to terrorism. They shake their fists at God since they have made themselves gods. The Lord God Almighty is still the One who created the very heavens and earth and everything. None can stand against the power of God. Consider the hurricane, tornado, or tsunami. These are only a very small sampling of God's infinite power. Man, no matter what he thinks or how hard he tries, cannot stand against these very small displays of power. "But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath"(Jeremiah 10:10). God's power makes all tremble, even nature.

In verse five the Israelites confess their disobedience before the Lord God Almighty. "But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?" God is angry. His just anger causes great despair. Listen again to verse six: "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." They used the wind to separate grain from the chaff. They feel like empty hulls - worthless. God's justice causes great despair for even those actions that look good to the world are worthless in God's eyes.

The great despair at God's justice is even more bitter as we look at verse seven: "No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins." They do not even feel worthy enough to call on his name. Israel does not even try to grasp God's great love. The face of God is hidden from them. Israel is wasting away. This is their confession. This is truth – sin truly separates from God.

When was the last time you heard the word sin outside of the church? Check the newspaper or magazines that you read. Sin is missing. The media has erased the word sin from its vocabulary. "Educated" people in our enlightened society deny sin. Worse, sin has been replaced with the word disease. Today addictions are considered to be diseases and not sin. Where is the cure? Alcoholism, gambling addiction, and overeating are still sins, not diseases. "If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives" (1 John 1:10). This has happened in our day and age.

Sin is still sin in the eyes of our God. God hates sin. God promises to punish sin. It makes no difference to God. One sin condemns. God does not rate sin. There are no big sins or little sins. God's justice is swift and there is no appeal once the sentence is announced. "For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!" Sin does separate us from God. His justice does lead to despair. We just like Israel need to tremble at God's power and despair over his justice, for only then will we appreciate his mercy and be filled with confidence. Only then are we ready to WELCOME OUR SAVIOR KING!

In the depth of their despair Isaiah directs them to look up! There is no place to look except up. He offers up the prayer of Israel in verse nine: "Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people." What a

comforting thought that despite all our sins God still considers us to be his people. How patient and long-suffering! That's what Isaiah says in verse eight: "Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." God is still their Father. Their Father would not leave them nor forsake them. They were made from the dust of the earth. As the clay the Potter made them as he wanted. In the depth of despair there was nothing left for Israel to discover except God's great mercy. With all of this in mind we are ready to WELCOME OUR SAVIOR KING.

We can welcome him with great confidence for as Isaiah points out in verses four and five, he cares for his people. There is no one like him: "Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. ⁵ You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways." God acts on behalf of those who love him. The Lord God Almighty helps, always.

The awesomeness of our God causes us different reactions. At times we tremble. At times we despair. These reactions to God's Law cause us to turn to God's Gospel. In the Gospel of our God we react and live our lives with confidence. In the Gospel we hear, learn, believe, and confess God's great mercy. Our sins condemn us. But God is greater than our sins and he forgives. God does not treat us as our sins deserve. The Psalmist says. "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us"(Psalm 103:11,12). This is God's great forgiveness. God removes our sins. No longer is there any record of the wrongs we have often committed.

Our awesome God is almost beyond our human comprehension. His mercy is the exact opposite of our sinful, human nature. The prophet Micah declares how the Lord, in mercy, removes our sins – another definition of forgiveness. God tramples our sins underfoot and casts them into the depth of the sea. Then there is only one reaction. "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy"(Micah 7:18). Our sinful nature loves to get even. We often delight to show hatred, not mercy. We lash out with wicked words against those who curse us. We harbor evil thoughts against those who do not think well of us. Not so with our God. Our God delights to show mercy! God's undeserved mercy is our confidence!

Eternal salvation is impossible with man but not with God. God's Law reveals God's power and everyone trembles. God's Law reveals God's justice and this leads the believer to despair. Rejoice. God's Gospel reveals God's mercy and we are confident – heaven IS our home. God is our Father! "However, as it is written: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him'-- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit"(1 Corinthians 2:9).

What a joy it is to:

WELCOME OUR SAVIOR KING

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Joel Jaeger