

# “Coming Down”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – December 3, 2023*

First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 80:1-7

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Isaiah 64:1-9

This morning, I would like for us to think about cosmology. Not to be confused with cosmetology – we are not going to be discussing skin care products or hair styles – cosmology is the exploration of the nature of the universe. As with many religions, the Judeo-Christian faith is built upon a vertical worldview: imagining God in the heavens above and humans living on the earth below. This vertical cosmology infuses the Christmas story with angels descending and a guiding star in the sky. Through the incarnation, God appears in our midst – coming down to be a part of the lowly human realm – as a child born in a stable with a dirt floor.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” the prophet pleads here. This is the same God who has come down to rescue the people of Israel before, making the mountains quake and the nations tremble. God brought this chosen tribe out of slavery in Egypt, through a time and place of wilderness, and into the Promised Land. They are the Lord’s covenant people. “From ages past,” the prophet also says, “no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.”

And yet, the distance between heaven and earth, between God and God’s people, can at times seem so far. Even God’s own people become unclean, and our sinful ways carry us away like the wind. Disasters and calamities befall us, and we fail to remember God’s awesome deeds. When the world is turned inside-out and upside-down, it can seem like the divine has retreated to heaven, as if God’s face is hidden from us.

Thus, we look to assign blame: as the prophet says, “You were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed.” As confessions go, this one leaves something to be desired. Like children, we act out because our parent has ignored us, but, at least, it got God to pay attention to us again. A parent who receives such an apology might grow more enraged; or may receive it as a wake-up call and an invitation. They might take the opportunity to figure out why their child thought they

weren't there to listen and take steps to bridge the gulf that had formed between them.<sup>1</sup>

But at the point when the chasm appears too wide to be crossed, when all hope seems lost, the prophet – on behalf of the people – makes this profession: “We are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” God is an artisan, having created the world and all that is in it. God not only can shape us but desires to mold us in the divine image and likeness.

And so, for Christians, God chooses to come down to us and take on our humanness in the incarnation of Jesus. God bridges the vertical divide by becoming one of us, with all our human frailness and vulnerability.

Advent is a season of preparation and anticipation for Christmas. As God came down in the past, God comes to us again. God selects a young woman, a virgin, to give birth to God's own Son in a stable; and shepherds and traveling wise men to come and provide testimony to this miracle. The divine takes on human form. God, the potter, chooses to become the clay.

Like a loving parent, God chooses to re-engage with humanity despite our sinful and destructive ways. We are, all of us, God's beloved children. Four times in these verses, the prophet repeats a Hebrew phrase meaning “all of us,” or, in our translation, “we all.” We are unclean – all of us; we fade like a leaf – all of us. And yet, we are the work of God's hand – all of us; we are God's people – all of us. This emphasis reminds us that we, as humans, are in this together and that we – all of us – belong to God.<sup>2</sup>

Like children, we sometimes believe that having to wait means that God, our parent, is distant and not paying proper attention to us. Consumed, as we are, with our individual needs, we fail to remember the powerful ways that God has come down in the past. If only, we think, our elusive creator would show up and fight our battles, make things easier for us, overcome the powers that we fear may harm us, and answer our questions. Here, Isaiah's laments mirror our own insecurities, guilt, and desire to place blame.

The Advent season reminds us to wait: to anticipate and prepare for God's coming down in Jesus Christ. “God works for those who wait for him,” the prophet says. God reserves the right to keep us waiting. Time – measured in minutes and hours, days and years – was made for humans, not for God. Advent reminds us that

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<sup>1</sup> Anatheia Portier-Young from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>2</sup> Kristen Wendland, “The Advent Prophet”

God is not in a hurry; the reality is that while God is great, God can also be gradual. When it comes to God's methods, God's process of molding and shaping us, God can be slow.

Maybe, sometimes, God is slow because we are not ready to receive what God wants to give us. Sometimes, perhaps, God is slow because the ultimate end goal is not our gain but, instead, God's glory.

This particular passage from Isaiah closes with an impassioned appeal for God to look favorably on the people of Israel, to forgive their sins against God, and to remember that they are God's people. Looking back, we are inclined to believe that the wait likely had less to do with God remembering them than it did with the people needing to remember that God was their caring and concerned parent.

Like a parent, God might have been disappointed with how the children were acting. God may have allowed them to engage in self-destructive behavior. This patient God might even have let them shrivel up and blow away, like a leaf in winter.

But with them, as with us, God's purpose has never been our destruction. God's greatest wish is that of a parent, who always hopes against hope that the children will see the error of their ways – whether destructive behaviors or broken relationships or polluting our planet – and return home.

The invitation that we are given to gather at the Lord's Table is a manifestation of God's ultimate hope that we will come back home. Like a parent who sets the table and prepares the meal, God is always hoping against hope that we will take our seat and be fed. Just as God came down to release the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, and just as God came down to earth in a human form on Christmas, God comes down again to be in this bread that is broken and the cup that is shared.

The distance separating heaven from earth, between God and God's people, is not as far as we often imagine it to be. God, the potter, is continually molding and shaping us – all of us – to be a more merciful, welcoming, and just people. And though we may be impatient, God, the loving parent, is always working for those who wait for him.

Welcome to Advent: this season of anticipation and preparation. May this be – for you, and for all people – a blessed time of waiting for God's coming down. Amen.