

December 3, 2017: First Sunday of Advent (Year B)
Isaiah 64:1-9: Come Down Home

Something we often associate with the Season of Advent is the idea of coming home. Our homes are the first place we experience the Season, where we, as children, wait expectantly for the arrival of Christmas and all the joy that brings. Giving gifts, receiving gifts, spending time with family and friends, enjoying special foods like Christmas cookies, getting a break from school and work, and dreaming about the possibility of snow. It's nothing but a dream here in North Carolina.

Of course, we eventually grow up and leave home, maybe start a family of our own, establish new Christmas traditions (or toss aside all those from our childhood and embrace those of our spouse). This too brings us great joy, but for many of us, there remains that small part of us that wishes we could come home for Christmas, and experience Christmas the way it used to be. Even now some of you can hear the familiar sound of Bing Crosby's voice singing, "I'll be home for Christmas."

The idea of "coming home" for Christmas is going to be our theme as we move through the Season of Advent together. For this first Sunday we are going to look at the idea of God coming home for Christmas. In our text for this morning we find the people of Israel making just that request.

Read Isaiah 64:1-9

As a child, the days leading up to Christmas morning are full of temptations, all revolving around presents. If you know where your parents hide them, it's hard not to sneak into their room, and look in the closet, or under the bed, in order to find out what you are getting. After the presents are wrapped, it's hard not to go up to the ones with your name on them, and try to guess what's inside, by weighing them, shaking them, factoring in their size. My Dad had a solution to help with that. He would just put numbers on them instead of names. And these numbers were based on a unique formula he came up with for each of us. The formula would change each year, so we couldn't figure it out. This is why I hate math to this day.

As an adult, I face a different set of temptations, but they also revolve around presents. Probably the biggest one is the temptation to use Christmas gifts as leverage, to inspire good behavior. It is amazing how effective it is to say to your children, "If you don't cut that out you might be sorry on Christmas morning," or "If you don't clean your room, don't be surprised if there is nothing under the tree with your name on it." It's almost like a Christmas miracle, how quickly bad behavior can be corrected.

As tempting as it is, I try not to do it. I don't want to be one of those parents who make empty threats, and for me it would be empty. There is nothing either of my kids could do that would prevent me from giving them gifts on Christmas morning. For the simple reason that I don't give them gifts as a reward for good behavior. I give them to them because I love them. No amount of bad behavior could change that. (I might decide they can't play with them until next Christmas. But I will at least let them open them).

The people of Israel knew this was the way their heavenly Father approached the giving of gifts to his children, or at least they hoped it were true. This is how they could be so bold as to ask him to come home, and dwell with them.

The book of Isaiah has several chapters, sixty-six to be exact. For a variety of reasons, biblical scholars think it was written by two or even three different authors. The last portion, which included the passage

we read a few moments ago, was written in the years immediately following Israel's return from exile. After being conquered by a stronger nation fifty years or so earlier, they were forced to leave their homes and their beloved city of Jerusalem. Now they were allowed to return, but they were struggling to rebuild their city, their temple, and their faith.

They had to worry about other surrounding nations that saw their success as a threat to their own national security. On top of that, the religious leaders in charge of rebuilding the temple and their religion were corrupt and leading the people astray. There was this small remnant that was trying desperately to remain faithful, to stay true to the God that had called them into existence, but they were fighting an uphill battle. They knew they needed divine intervention. They knew they needed God to come down and fight for them if they were going to defeat the evil that surrounded them.

But at the same time, they knew they had no business asking. They knew they were also to blame for their present situation. They too were part of the problem. They too had sinned. They too had disobeyed God. They didn't deserve his help. They were not worthy of his redemption. So they didn't appeal to God on the basis of their good works, or because of anything they had done, but for the simple reason that they were his children, and he was their Father, and he loved them.

If the people of God were to make a list of the things they hoped to receive at Christmas, God coming home would be at the very beginning. For hundreds of years, the people of God have been gazing heavenward, waiting for God to come down. For those who have come to know God through his Son, Jesus, God's coming home will take the form of Christ returning to the earth as King, and establishing his kingdom in all its fullness.

That desire, that longing for God to come home, only increases as we get older. We become more and more aware of the darkness that is in the world, and we become more and more convinced that all we really want for Christmas, is for the light of Christ to come, and destroy the darkness once and for all. But if we are honest, we struggle to make that request, because we know that we too are part of the problem, we understand that we don't deserve to get a gift like that.

I want to give you an example of how we are complicit with the darkness in our world.

In recent weeks the news has been saturated with reports of powerful men who have been accused of, and in many cases, have admitted to, committing sins of a sexual nature. It seems like every day new allegations emerge and the list just keeps getting longer and longer. I'm sure some people are just shaking in their boots, wondering if they are going to be next, but I imagine most people, and I would include all of you in this, are not worried, because you haven't done these things. You have never assaulted someone, or threatened to fire someone because they didn't agree to do something, or made repeated, inappropriate comments about what someone was wearing. That doesn't mean we are not guilty.

The first men in this whole thing to be named as perpetrators were involved in the film industry in Hollywood. It's easy to point the finger and say, "Well no wonder. Why should we be surprised when we look at the kind of movies they are creating." But then we need to ask ourselves, "Who is watching those movies and those television shows that they were producing?" That's right, we are. If you have ever viewed a pornographic image, or bought a product because an attractive person was selling it, or looked at someone and saw a thing to be desired, before you saw a person, created in God's image, you have contributed, on some level, to turning human beings into objects.

My purpose in saying all this is to make the point that we are all responsible, to some degree, for the

darkness in which we are living. Even understanding that, we still ask God to come down and make his home among us. We ask out of desperation. Our request arises from the knowledge that this world can be a beautiful place with him in it, a place with no more sorrow, no more suffering, no more pain. We ask because we believe that God is gracious, loving, and forgiving.

And how do we know that our heavenly Father is like this? Because He has torn the heavens, and has come down, through the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Twice in his Gospel, Mark borrows Isaiah's image of God tearing open the heavens. The first example is when Jesus was baptized, and the heavens were opened. The second is when Jesus is crucified, and the temple curtain was torn in two. Both represent a removal of the wall that separates heaven from earth, and the possibility of a personal, intimate relationship with God for all his children.

We ask for God to come home. Because of Jesus, and the forgiveness we receive through his death on the cross, we can even look forward to his coming. Through our relationship with God through Jesus, and through the power of the Holy Spirit within us, we can be part of the solution, instead of the problem. We can receive the light of Christ, and carry it with us, dispelling the darkness, instead of adding to it.