

When God Hides

1st Sun. in Advent – 11/29/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Isaiah 64:1-9 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 1a, “**Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down...**”

v. 9b, “**Behold, please look, we are all Your people.**”

Introduction

✘ Where is God? That might seem like a silly or even dangerous question to ask, to many of us here this morning. But honestly, even for many Christians it is very common to think that God is NOT right here with us.

➔ Instead He seems far away, hidden and impersonal, especially when trouble comes into our lives.

✘ You see your parents fighting all the time. You can't figure out your school work or particular challenges at work. You and your friends no longer get along. Severe illness or progressive disease dominates your life. Or the battle with old age and all that it brings is more than you can handle.

➔ At times like these, it's very common that we and our world are tempted to cry out, “Where are you at God?” Before our Old Testament reading, in Isaiah 63:15, the prophet Isaiah cries out to the LORD with a similar plea, “Look down from heaven and see, from Your holy and beautiful habitation. Where are Your zeal and Your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me.”

I. Come out of hiding God

✘ And now in verse one of today's text, Isaiah gets real with this question and he boldly cries out with a plea of despair on behalf of the people of Israel. “Oh that You would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at Your presence”.

➔ “Show Yourself, O LORD”. That's the basic cry here. “Strip away all the barriers. Stop hiding up in heaven God. Tear open the sky and reveal Your presence in mighty and terrifying ways because we want to see You, O God”.

➔ “And by the way God, we want it to be in obvious ways like when fire burns wood and boils water” (v.2).

✘ But notice in the second part of verse two, there is a stipulation to this cry for God's revealing presence. “Make Your name known to Your adversaries...that the nations might tremble at Your presence!”

➔ Clearly they've been dealing with people who don't believe that God even exists. Does that sound familiar? So Isaiah want's God to show those unbelievers that they are wrong!

➔ Well, who among us hasn't wished from time to time that God would do something remarkable and obvious to shut down the people around us who make fun of our faith or make us uncomfortable, even embarrassed to admit that we believe in Christ?

✘ Isaiah says in verses 3-4 that God has done this before, “When You did awesome things that we did not look for...”. Who expected God to divide the water in an entire sea so that His people could escape on dry ground? Neither Pharaoh nor his army did, that's for sure. Who could have guessed that God would reveal Himself in a pillar of fire by day to lead the people through

the wilderness? Who would ever think that God could bring down the walls of Jericho by just having His people march around it and blow a bunch of rams' horns?

→ Yes, as verse four says, "No eye has seen a God besides You, who acts for those who wait for Him." Our God is utterly unique. No other so-called god actually comes out of hiding and acts in tangible ways to address the needs of those who believe in Him.

→ He has done it before. So, why are the people; why are we not seeing God do that kind of thing today?

II. Our sin is the problem

⊗ As verse five says, we know that God promises to "meet" and be with those who seek to follow Him in righteous works and remember His direction and commands, right?

→ And that's us isn't it? I mean, how many of you here desire to follow God and obey His Commandments?

⊗ But with his very next breath, Isaiah answers his own question and ours. The problem is not God, but us!

→ Like Isaiah we must recognize and admit that we still come up short at every turn. We must come to grips with the facts in verse five, "Behold, You were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?"

→ Yes, God's anger toward the Israelites and toward us is appropriate. Our sin is constant, even as we seek to live faithfully for the LORD. And so, we do not deserve to be saved!

⊗ And just in case any of us are living in denial about that fact, Isaiah uses four similes or comparisons to describe the reality and wedge that our sin drives in between us and God.

→ Beginning in verse six, #1 – "we have all become like one who is unclean". Just as dirt and grime and impurities make things harder to recognize, so our sin covers us and hinders our intended status with God.

→ #2 – "...all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment". The Hebrew term here describes a garment or cloth that women wore during menstruation. All of your best deeds and mine are still stained; still polluted by sin. They cannot save us.

→ #3 – "We all fade like a leaf...". This should be obvious to us all. We don't last on our own. The result of our sin, as God proclaimed it to Adam and Eve when they first sinned, is that we all wither and die. Our earthly existence is temporary.

→ And #4 – "...our iniquities, like the wind, take us away." Our selfish and sinful desires blow us around, to and fro, because when we live in sin and disobey God we have nothing to hold us in place.

⊗ In essence, our sin-problem is a lack-of-faith-problem. As Isaiah said earlier in 63:19, "We have become like those over whom You have never ruled, like those who are not called by Your name." We are the ones who have turned our backs on God not the other way around.

→ In verse seven Isaiah calls out our lack of passion toward God. He says, "There is no one who calls upon Your name, who rouses himself to take hold of You...". We are sleepy; we're lazy in our faith. It's all our doing.

→ Isaiah continues, "for You have hidden Your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities". Since we are unwilling to fully commit to God, He leaves us where our actions indicate we "want" to be and He gives us over to our sinful desires.

- Isaiah describes the place where rejection of God inevitably leads – a place where God seems hidden.
- ✘ Even worse, he says it is a place where we “melt in the hand of our iniquities”. This is the end result of continued and constant sin – a place where God’s anger necessarily burns; a place of melting away from our Creator; a place where we are headed to hell.

III. God revealed to us

- ✘ Thankfully Isaiah starts the very next verse with the word “but”. “But now, O LORD, You are our Father...”. He only refers to God as “our Father” eight times. So it is significant when he does it here!

- Our relationship with God is one based in our Father’s love for His children. He longs for us to see the depth of our sorry and selfish and dangerous state. And He wants us to know that He has come down to be with us in His Son!

- Before that He sent prophets to whom He gave His word to shake us up like Isaiah has done here and show us how critical our nonchalant attitude is; how severe our life of sin is and where it leads – eternal death and separation from God!

- ✘ There’s more to Isaiah’s “but” – he says, “we are the clay, and You are our potter; we are all the work of Your hand”. Isaiah sets the example for us here of the result of a repentant heart; of an attitude with a dynamic faith.

- He calls us to open our eyes of faith to see that God not only is our Father, but also our “Potter”, which means that we see Him as our Creator; our Sustainer and the one who is utterly in charge of all things.

- God does what He desires with us and our lives, and we humbly submit and mold our thoughts; our words, and our deeds to His desire; to His will.

- ✘ This is the relationship that you and I and all believers desire more than anything else, right? In fact, you and I already prayed earlier much like Isaiah did here in our text in the Collect of the Day. Let’s pray it again, “Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your might deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.”

- This plea for mercy that Isaiah leads us to pray is based on what we know of God’s character. We know His anger toward sin is necessary and valid, but in faith we plead for Him to find a way NOT to destroy us as we deserve. Psalm 27:9 is just such a plea: “Hide not Your face from me. Turn not Your servant away in anger, O You who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation!”

- ✘ That’s our prayer in verse nine: “remember not iniquity forever”. That’s pretty bold of us isn’t it? We’re asking God to do something we can’t – “forget all of the terrible things we’ve done to You”.

- “Instead Lord,” we pray, “remember Your promises throughout history and recorded in the pages of Holy Scripture”. Such as one just a little earlier in Isaiah 43:25 where God said, “I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins”.

- “Yes Lord, remember the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and Moses that You would come in human form and make Your people more numerous than stars; that Your mercy endures forever; that Your love is unconditional”.

- ⊗ Most important though is the LORD's promise in Isaiah 62:11, "Behold" – that means open your eyes folks and see. "Behold your salvation comes; behold, His reward is with Him...".
 - ➔ Did you notice there that our salvation is a "His"; a person and the LORD promises through Isaiah that He "comes".
- ⊗ That's what this season of Advent is all about. The promises of God that point you and me to see that God has torn aside all barriers; He has burst dramatically into this earthly existence and He has done all that is needed to save you and me and make things right!
 - ➔ He did it all in Jesus when He came, born of a virgin. Is that dramatic enough for you folks?
 - ➔ As we heard about in our Gospel reading He came into Jerusalem on a donkey to bear the guilt of sin for all mankind through the torturous and gruesome sacrifice on a cross. Oh yeah, if that's not magnificent enough, how about this: He rose from death three days later and burst forth from His tomb in victory over death.
 - ➔ What more can God's adversaries want for proof?
- ⊗ But there is more that He does for you and me right now. He tears through what fits with rational thinking and He comes to us in His body and blood; the same body and blood that He shed on the cross, when He feeds us His forgiveness and salvation right here in His gift of Holy Communion.
 - ➔ And He physically washes our spiritual garments, our entire souls clean using ordinary water connected to His miraculous Word in baptism so that we are now purified and fully clean. We are as verse nine says, "all Your people" O Lord.

Conclusion

- ⊗ You see, God has been with us all along. From of old He promised to come. He tore aside all barriers and He came in Jesus to save us sinners. He comes to us every day in His Spirit and His Word and Sacraments.
 - ➔ So now Christians, with eyes opened wide in faith, we look eagerly and confidently to the final day when He rends the heavens wide to come; to take us to our eternal home at His side. Amen.