

# **“O that you would tear open the heavens!”**

**Isaiah 64:1-9 and 1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

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**First Sunday of Advent**

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Our New Testament reading for today is from Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth, and this may seem like an odd place to turn for an Advent reading. But listen closely, and you will hear in these words the story of Advent.

Advent, as you know, is a time waiting and expectation and longing ... for a time when God will make things right again. And that’s what Paul is addressing in these words.

Let’s listen, the first letter to the Corinthians, first chapter, beginning with verse 3...

**<sup>3</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

**<sup>4</sup> I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.<sup>5</sup> For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—<sup>6</sup> God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. <sup>7</sup> Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. <sup>8</sup> He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.**

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

You know, I have always wanted to start one of my sermons with the words of John the Baptist, and now that I only have two more months before I leave, I think I finally have the courage to do this.

As most of you know, I always start my sermons by saying **“dear friends of Jesus Christ.”** And that sounds so nice, doesn’t it? It sounds warm and inviting, and of course I really do try to be warm and inviting. That’s how my preaching professors taught me to do it.

Do any of you know how John the Baptist would start his sermons? He would say, **“You brood of vipers.”** And he didn’t have a microphone and amplification equipment, so just imagine him shouting those words.

**“You brood of vipers.”** You can almost see the veins in his neck bulging.

Eugene Peterson, in his translation of the Bible known as The Message, translates those words, **“You have minds like a snake pit.”**

I don’t suppose that John the Baptist cared much about being warm and inviting, do you? But I’m guessing that he had the attention of his audience from his very first words.

In fact, as you know, large numbers of people walked long distances to hear what he had to say. The place where he set up his ministry along the Jordan River was far from where most people lived, but they went out anyway.

And then he called them a bunch of snakes.

There’s an American preacher whose name is Joel Osteen, and he’s known as the **“smiling preacher.”** I don’t want to say anything critical about him today, because he reaches millions of people every week with the gospel, and he seems like a decent and honourable man.

But in America he is known as **“the smiling preacher.”** And he really does have a wonderful smile. His wife, Victoria, who joins him every week at the pulpit, also has a very nice smile. And together they appear in many, many living rooms around the world through the miracle of satellite broadcasting.

It occurred to me last week, as I was preparing for today, as I was thinking about Advent, and what this season really means, that not one Old Testament prophet is known as **“the smiling prophet.”** Did you know that?

Certainly not Isaiah, whose words we are going to look at today. Certainly not Jeremiah. I can’t think of any prophets who were warm and inviting in the way they spoke to the people. It’s hard to imagine that they ever smiled.

I served a church one time where a picture of Jesus made its way around the staff. Everyone seemed to have a copy pinned to the bulletin board in his or her office. And in the picture Jesus isn’t just smiling. He’s laughing. He’s throwing his back as though he just heard the best joke of the year.

So, as I would walk around the church office, I would see these pictures everywhere, and I loved it. They made me smile.

As I imagine it, Jesus laughed and smiled a great deal. But there isn’t a single apostle in the New Testament who is known as **“the smiling apostle.”** The Apostle Paul, as a matter of fact, always comes across as a very serious character.

In the verses I read today from his first letter to the Corinthians, he starts warmly enough. He writes, **“Grace and peace to you from God our Father”** ... which is very nice, but by the very next paragraph he is saying, **“What is wrong with you people? Can’t you get along with each other? You’re acting like a bunch of children.”**

John the Baptist always appears at this time of year, and it’s curious because he wasn’t at the manger. But every year, at about this time, we find ourselves confronted with this man. Luke’s gospel, especially, places him very early in the gospel story, partly because his birth occurs very close to the birth of Jesus.

I heard a preacher say one time that the way to Bethlehem always goes through John the Baptist, and I think that's true, and I want to spend some time thinking about that with you today.

Another way of saying it would be: The way to the Promised Land always goes through the wilderness. Or – I really like this one – the way to the resurrection always goes through the cross. This is such an important biblical truth which somehow gets lost in our celebrations at this time of year.

You see, there is this uncomfortable biblical truth that things are going to be very bleak and dark and hard and troubled before God's light shines.

John the Baptist himself spoke of the winnowing fork. Remember? And even though I didn't grow up on a farm – or anywhere near a farm – I have seen farmers take a large fork and throw grain in the air. And the idea, of course, is that the wind will carry away the chaff, the worthless stuff, while the grain, the heavier stuff, the valuable stuff, falls to the floor.

And like many of you, I have always assumed that the chaff is other people, people I don't like very much. So, in that action, God is separating the good from the bad, good people from bad people. And it's amazing how easy it is for us to identify the bad people, the chaff, who need to be separated and burned.

But then later in life, it has become clear to me that there's whole different level of meaning there. I am the one who is being purified. The winnowing fork throws me in the air. And you too. And the experiences of our lives – especially the difficult ones – have a way of changing us and humbling us and helping us to become the people God intends for us to be.

The chaff, you see, gets blown away.

When the people went out to hear John the Baptist in the wilderness, he told them that they were a **“brood of vipers.”**

And of course it's true that he did not have kind things to say about Herod and the political leadership of the day and certainly not about the religious leadership. In fact, he lost his life for his criticism of Herod.

But here's the thing: John the Baptist directed those words – **“you brood of vipers”** – at the people who came out to see him.

He might have said, **“We are all to blame. The world is a mess, and we are as much to blame as anyone. Never mind Herod. Never mind the Temple leadership. Over course they are to blame. But take a look at your own heart.”**

Let me stop there and say what you might be thinking right now: **“This is a very strange place to start the Advent season!”**

I mean, the Christmas markets are up, the smell of Gluwein and a bunch of other smells are in the air. The lights have been lit on Bahnhofstrasse. (I will miss that.) The Swarovski tree is up at the main train station, and it's covered once again in those beautiful crystal ornaments, which are for sale nearby.

This is the time of year to feel festive and full of good cheer, isn't it? I have some red and green socks that I can't to put on. What fun.

But tell me this: **“How are you feeling?”**

Seriously, how is it going for you? The truth is, you may be feeling great. I have had many wonderful Christmas seasons over the years, and I look forward to this Christmas, so it’s possible to feel great right about now.

I know a young couple who became engaged to be married in the last couple of days – and I’m not thinking about Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, but another one – and I know that this Christmas will be one they will always remember. There are some young parents here and in my own family who will be celebrating their first Christmas with a newborn child, and that brings a wonderful new dimension to the season.

So, life is full of joys – many of them unexpected and thrilling – so please don’t misunderstand me.

But something is wrong in the world, terribly wrong.

I read the newspaper every morning with a sense of dread. Do you know what I mean? I wake up and then I wonder what horrible thing has happened while I was sleeping.

Someone here in our congregation became concerned about me and encouraged me not to read so much news. **“Doug, please, you should dial it back.”** And there may be wisdom in that ... in observing a “news fast” now and then. It would probably be good for all of us.

But whether we read the news or not, there is something wrong in the world.

We are living at a time of international change and re-alignment. Power is shifting among the countries of the world. Old alliances are giving way to new ones. And no one really knows what is going on. It’s scary.

In the U.S. – and God bless you, if you are totally unaware of this – but in the U.S., where I come from, there has been in the last few weeks what can only be called an uprising of women – women who have been assaulted and degraded and abused and who have finally found their voices. They are asking for a stop to it. They are asking that men be held accountable – finally – for their behaviour.

There is a culture, it seems clear, of privilege and entitlement and call-it-what-you-want that needs to stop. No child of God, male or female, deserves to be treated in a degrading way. Ever. It shouldn’t happen. It’s not terribly a complicated subject.

And to be honest with you, it’s not just the U.S. I figured that in a church like this if I mentioned what is happening in the U.S., then I should mention the rest of the world as well. And so, I started reading statistics about the treatment of women around the world, and I couldn’t read any more. Every statistic I found was worse than the last.

How have we put up with this for so long? Why have we excused what is inexcusable? On behalf of men everywhere, I am ashamed. Maybe John the Baptist was referring to the men in the crowd that day when he said, **“You brood of vipers.”**

Enough already. It must stop.

I wish the church had been the first voice to speak out on behalf of women, but as is too often the case, the church has been one of the last voices to speak out.

The world is a mess. It is beyond what any of us can fix. We can point out what is wrong, and we can point the finger at a few people who deserve blame, but we do not have the ability or the power or the strength to do very much about it. I am very good at feeling outrage, but I am as helpless as a baby to do anything about it.

And I know from talking to quite a few of you what you are thinking about the times in which we live – namely, that the time is near, that the signs are obvious that God is getting ready to do something, to wrap things up.

And once again, that may seem to you like a strange theme for Advent, but historically the church has always focused on the *second* coming of Christ at this time of year. I read yesterday that today is often known as **“second coming Sunday.”**

Why? Well, that’s easy. Jesus has already been born. I don’t know what you are looking forward to at this time of year, but I can tell you this much: Jesus is already here. We’re not waiting for the baby to be born in the manger. We are waiting for something far bigger.

In Isaiah, chapter 64, which you heard a few minutes ago, the prophet begins the chapter with a cry ... and it’s a cry of pain and desperation and hope: **“O that you would tear open the heavens.”**

And then, a little later Isaiah writes, **“come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!”**

Do you know something? That’s an Advent prayer, if there ever was one.

Come down and deal with this mess. And it’s not just the mess that others have made; it’s the mess that we have made as well, because in many cases we have allowed it to happen by what we have done, or by not opening our mouths, or by being afraid to say or do anything.

We are all responsible. We have taken a good creation – a creation that God intended for our enjoyment and pleasure – and we have turned it into a garbage heap.

Advent is a time of year when we experience longing and anticipation and excitement, but – and this is what I think we should see today – Advent is also a time for dread, for some feelings of sadness, and even grief. Advent is a time when we know something needs to happen, something big.

Next week we are going to look together at one of my favorite texts from Isaiah, and it’s found in chapter 40. I don’t want to get too far ahead of myself, but I also want to end with a word of hope. Isaiah says, **“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.”**

That’s an Advent prayer too. A prayer for comfort.

But too many of us associate comfort with a five-star hotel or a comfortable leather chair in front of a large-screen TV. That’s our idea of comfort. But comfort comes from a Latin word which suggests something more – namely, strength, literally “strength with.” It means to console or cheer up. When we go to the hospital to visit someone, we don’t tell jokes, but we offer comfort and strength.

Karl Barth once said that the biblical meaning of comfort is the strength to get up.

When I was 12 or 13 years old, I was doing some chores on a Saturday morning. My family always did chores on Saturday morning, and I always did my chores while listening to the radio, rock and roll. And it was always loud because of course rock and roll should be deafeningly loud.

So, one day I was doing my work with the radio on, and my father walked by and turn the volume down. And when he left, I of course walked over and cranked the volume back up. This happened 2 or 3 more times over the course of the morning, and finally, on his last trip through the room where I was working, my father simply turned off the radio, without saying anything, and he walked out.

I was ticked. It doesn't take much to make a teenager mad, but I decided that I had put up with enough from my father and his unreasonable behavior, and I left the house and I started walking.

I didn't get very far because I started to wonder where I was going. I had no plan.

Anyway, I headed over to the church where my family attended, and I sat down. Mad. And a little while later, I saw my father walking toward me. I'm not sure how he knew where I would be, but he walked toward me, and then he simply sat down next to me and didn't say a word.

And for what seemed like a long time, we just sat there in silence. I was mad, and he was mad. And after while, maybe it was lunch time, I don't know, he got up and said, **"Come on, let's get back to work."** And I got up, and the two of us walked home together.

Not hand in hand, but we walked together as though a cloud had been lifted. Life could go on.

I don't know what you are praying for this Advent season, but I am praying that God will come down, as Isaiah puts it, that God will come down and sit next to us, to be with us in our hurt and anger and pain.

And then I am praying that God will say, **"Come on, there's work to be done."**

That's the promise of this season ... a God who loves us so much that he comes down, in human form, to be with us, to sit with us, to feel everything we are feeling, and then to lift us up ... because ... and this is important ... we can't do it on our own.