

The historical context from which this writing came was wither the Jewish exile in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC or after the initial phase of their return to Jerusalem under the Persian king Cyrus in 539 BC. The literary context of this text is part of a larger unit of communal lament offered by or on behalf of the Jewish community who was in need of God's help. As part of the communal lament, this passage constitutes a powerful plea for God to intervene in history in a decisive fashion to bring redemption to the people.

Isaiah 64:1-9

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As 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! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down and the mountains trembled before you. 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. You 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? 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. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you, for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter, we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord, do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us we pray, for we are all your people. Your sacred cities have become a desert; even Zion is a desert, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and glorious temple, where our fathers praised you, has been burned with fire, and all that we treasured lies in ruins. After all this, O Lord, will you hold yourself back? Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure?

"Prophetic Hope"

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!

Isaiah 64:1a

The theme for the first Sunday in Advent is Hope. Hope has many qualities. Hope is a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen in the future. Like "I hope to pass my test." Hope's work is creative and life promoting. Biblical hope differs from our innate ability to hope in that it is strengthened by faith. According to scripture, hope is grounded in the belief that our Heavenly Parent is dreaming a life-giving future for us, and is actively working to actualize God's reign of Love on earth as it is in heaven.

Back in Isaiah's time, Hope had some difficult work to do when she stepped into the Hebrew people's time of suffering. The exiles had lost their homes, families, temple, and livelihoods because of their sin against God's Holy Ways. All that they treasured lay in ruins. Suffering irretrievable loss, they felt abandoned by God, helpless and hopeless. They wondered out loud to one another: "How can we be saved?" To them, God was hidden. To them, God was silent. To them, God Almighty was angry and had stopped helping them out. Feeling alone in their suffering, they stopped calling on God's name.

So what's a prophet to do when his sin-sick people hadn't pinned their hopes on God for a very long time? Rule of thumb for prophets here is to wait for a Word from God before proceeding. So Isaiah waited. When God's word came, he did what he was told and led the community in a prayer of lament which got them calling upon God again.

'O that you would rend the heavens and come down'  
and dwell with us.

Advent means the "coming" of God. In her devotional on psalm 90:1 . . . "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations", Rev. Marchae Grair gets us thinking about our places of pain and suffering. In "Dwell with Me", she asks: Where do you dwell? Is it within a habit you promised yourself

you'd quit but continue to do when you're in a lonely place? Is it in a relationship you know you should leave but continue to convince yourself you need? Is it at a job---or even at a church ---that continues to demean who you are and the gifts you bring? Are you dwelling in something you've convinced yourself is the best you can get because dysfunction is now your acceptable norm? Too often we dwell in unhealthy habits, people, or places when we should really be dwelling in the promises of God. We evaluate situations and relationships by how long we can tolerate them instead of if they align with where God would have us to be or what God would have us to do. What if we stopped calling on God to save us as we dwell in the places we shouldn't stay and started calling on God to dwell with us when we are brave enough to go where only God can empower us to go? It's time we stopped demanding God show up in every situation and start asking if God would want us in that situation in the first place. Don't be afraid of leaving the dysfunction that may be your dwelling place. Be bold enough to leave. Have enough faith to disrupt what's meant to be disrupted. God promised to be our dwelling place so we wouldn't have to find home in the things that hurt.

'O that you would rend the heavens and come down'  
and forgive our sin.

In a companion devotion based on a scripture from Genesis 2:16b-17, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die," Kaji Dousa wrote: "Kertyschoo!" sneezed naughty Peter as he hid from the angry gardener, Mr. McGreagor, in Beatrix Potter's, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. Charming as that sneeze word is, I don't usually find sneezes adorable. I get sneezed on by far too many little ones (such as my own), oblivious to the peril of contagion. A sneeze becomes a warning, a sign of danger ahead. So too for Beatrix Potter. Peter has ignored his mother's admonition not to graze in the garden where his father had been snared and baked into a pie. But the carrots, the radishes were irresistible! And then . . . Kertyschoo! A sneeze gives his hiding place away. But trouble is soon to follow. How many times has God warned us

away from tempting gardens? But we go anyway. Out of habit, without thinking it through, following our friends, our culture, our greedy appetites, we're always feasting on other people's bounty. At "the time of the evening breeze" they hid from shame, as the fruit they consumed ate away at their consciences. They did not know what to do with their shame. Hiding in the bushes from the One who would come to walk with us, I wonder this: What's our sneeze? What is it that gives away our hiding place? What would it take for us to err and . . . come forward? Unafraid of our God? Maybe the largest offense was not their disobedience, but their lack of trust. What if they had owned up to their error? What if they had stood together and copped to their mistake? What if, rather than pointing the finger or hiding, Adam, Eve, Peter, any of us, stood brave and tall and asked for forgiveness? Are you ready to give up your hiding place?

"O that you would rend the heavens and come down'  
and shape us as a potter fashions the clay.

Rev. Dr. Martin Copenhagen explains Jesus' saving work in this way: 'When God has a human face, and lives the kind of life we do, we are given an opportunity and the challenge to see what a life claimed by God actually looks like' (quote from *Still Speaking Devotional*, Oct. 19, 2008). And poet Ann Weems puts Christ's saving action into verse.

Jesus wept  
And in his weeping he joined himself forever  
to those who mourn,  
He stands now throughout all time,  
This Jesus weeping with his arms about the weeping ones;  
'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.'  
He stands with the mourners for his name is God-With-Us.  
Jesus wept.  
In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life,  
There is a deafening alleluia,  
rising from the souls of those who weep,  
and of those who weep with those who weep.  
If you watch, you will see, the hand of God  
Putting the stars back in their skies, one by one. Ann Weems