

Tear Open the Heavens and Come Down!

Isaiah 64:1-9

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“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!”

If you come from a lectionary church—a church that steadfastly follows the rhythm of the liturgical year, Sunday after Sunday, from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent and on and on and on—then chances are that when Advent begins for you this year, these will be the very first words of scripture that you will hear.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

We are pretending today, of course, in our liturgy and our music, that Advent has already begun. And, at a gut level, too, it may well be that these first words of Advent are already more on your mind than you might think. They are, after all, words of lament, and lament comes easily to us when we are moving from one place to another; and if you think about it, that’s what you have done today.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

For most of us, it hasn’t necessarily been easy to get here, or, maybe more to the point, to leave where we are coming here from. Some of you almost talked yourselves out of coming. After all, leaving is hard. There are the farewells for that special someone or someones. There are the appointments to rearrange, the baby-sitters or the housekeepers or the kid who’s going to pick up the mail and the papers. If you’re out of school for the summer and your friends are for the most part staying in town—swimming or going to movies or having one sleepover after another or just hanging out—you’ve had to say good-bye to them all and to ask them not to have too much fun while you’re gone. If you’re a church musician on staff somewhere, there is that Business Manager who needs once again to be assured that, yes you do have a continuing education allowance. The leaving is hard—so hard, in fact, that you may have wondered out loud whether this trip to Montreat was really worth it. People have such genteel ways of punishing us for our leave-takings. Have you ever noticed that? When you leave, people just cling to you. My last day in the office at Austin Seminary before coming here was like that, and I would walk down the hall of the academic building feeling like a walking strip of Velcro—people coming up to stick this note or that conversation on me.

A couple of Sundays ago in Austin, my family and I had gone to church. It was a great service, and we were among the righteous who, at the end of the service, had not started coffee-hour right there in the sanctuary but had taken our seats

again to listen to a magnificent Bach organ voluntary. The best pipe organ in town, the best organist in town, and Bach! Does anything get better than that? I was in heaven. And during that voluntary, this church member spied me sitting in church and, from the back of the church, walked down the side aisle to my pew and knelt down to begin a conversation with me. “I know you’ve gotten so important and all, what with your big preaching gig in Montreat, but I just wanted to know if you were too important anymore to schedule lunch with me sometime this summer.” He’s like that—loves to snap the rat-tail with you. I said, “Well, I am too important, now, for that, but thanks for asking.”

I was teasing, but I was also trying to blow him off. I mean, it was Bach! The Passacaglia in C Minor—that part where the bass notes are stalking the landscape of creation like God Almighty looking for a partner in a collaborative act called the making of a world, and then come the higher notes—like maybe the perfect human, Jesus Christ, is starting to sing in harmony with God. I was in ecstasy, but he was still there kneeling next to my pew.

He went jabbering on: “I tell you what, I could do it just about any old day—Tuesday’s good, any Thursday’s good, and we’re not going anywhere this summer; you know we went overseas last year, and I came back with some sort of intestinal bug and it took me six months to get over it. I’ve just about decided I’m never going to travel again outside this country—I went to three gastroenterologists; anyhow let me get my PDA out here, or my palm pilot, whatever you call it.” Now the organist was starting to really open it up, and every bell and whistle that instrument had was just blowing it out and the windows were starting to rattle! It was the end of worship—but it was worship! “What kind of PDA do you have—an iPhone or a Moto Q or a Blackberry, what do you have?” He just knelt there jabbering in my ear, and you’ve got to be nice, and I couldn’t begin to tell him to put his stupid Blackberry or Moto Q away and take his shoes off because we were standing on holy ground (after all, he may be a donor!); but I wish I had had the presence of mind to lift my eyes to the rafters, and say silently:

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

People punish us for leaving. And, just to be honest, who knows what kind of mischief can in fact happen while you’re gone? That substitute organist may play so well that folks will forget who you are! Have you thought about that? That retired Army colonel who’s the new Chair of the Worship Committee may call an emergency meeting for the sole purpose of buying new hymnals that have all the old nineteenth-century favorites in them. An ad hoc committee of your favorite people may surprise you by painting your office while you’re gone—and they know you’re going to love the new color (they got it on sale).

Leaving is hard, quite simply because it means that we are moving from one context to another, and, if you think about it, lament in that circumstance is natural. Do you remember the last time you moved? Almost six years ago, after close to twelve years in Atlanta, we moved to Austin. I was moving from the life of a pastor to the life of a seminary president; from the Southeast, where there are four seasons, to the Southwest, where there are two seasons—Summer and not-Summer. It was hard for me, but it was hard for all of us. Our younger daughter, the sixth-

grader, adapted quicker and more easily; but our older daughter, the ninth-grader, first year in High School, ripped involuntarily out of the world that had been her oyster—well, you know the story, we ruined her life, at least for a few months. I'd come home at night and she'd look at me with her eyes all scrunched up, like "Here comes that perpetrator again—the one who heard a call to come here in a voice not loud enough for any of the rest of the family to hear." In time she got over it, but, for a while there, the only word for it was lament. Because lament, in fact, is the natural voice for those who are moving from one place to another.

Lament is a good word to describe what we're thinking and feeling now as we watch our world move from one place to another. This war that drags on and on, in which so much seems at stake and our sons and daughters are sent out into harm's way; the economy which is eating up our mortgages and our college tuitions and gas is now over four dollars a gallon at the pump; this world in which there is a palpable daily erosion of hope...and we do not know for sure where we are headed and when we will get there. But there is this sense in which giant tectonic plates are shifting, and we can hardly assess the scale of it—the little span of our lives is that puny. We are definitely moving from one place to another. And so we hear this lament tonight, and we understand.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

Barbara Taylor has written recently of how the literary critic George Steiner once said that we are living now in the aftermath of what he called the broken covenant between the word and the world. He said that until the 1870's, a little before Montreat was started, western civilization honored a contract between logos and cosmos, between the word and the world; and there was an essential trust between those two things. Once in a while that trust would be broken, but mainly it held; and people spoke and listened to one another with confidence in the ability of the word to describe the world in a truthful and meaningful way. Steiner said, though, that that trust was broken in European, Central European, and Russian culture during the decades from the 1870's to the 1930's, resulting, he said, in a revolution of spirit which defines modernity itself.

And here is Steiner's case in point: in Germany in the 1940's, we discovered that a person who could read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, who could listen to Bach and Schubert while getting ready for bed, could also get up the next morning and go to his day's work at Auschwitz. With this discovery, said Steiner, "the house of classic humanism, the dream of reason which animated Western society," largely broke down; and now we live in a time "after the Word," a time of epilogue, which is both a time of endings and new beginnings.

What an interesting analysis, except that, with all due respect, I disagree with just when he claims that trust was broken. I don't think it was as late as the 1870's to the 1930's. I think it was broken back in Eden. I think Eden, for sure, was a time of endings. That's when words began to become compromised, when people began to doubt whether God was up to God's own word, and trust was shattered; and the rest of scripture is the account of God trying every possible way to restore that trust and to live in relationship with a covenant people who just never seem to get that God is not against them, but for them. It's in Eden that that trust relationship ends.

And, in the way that broken trust just keeps on finding new evidence, like a snowball that just gets bigger and bigger, it is this same broken trust that is at the root, finally, of Isaiah's lament tonight. Sometime after the children of Israel have been marched off into exile by the Babylonians, sometime after their beloved temple has all but been burned to the ground and is now lying in ruins, and "Zion has become a wilderness" and "Jerusalem a desolation," and the foundation of that religious community has been shaken to its core, Isaiah sends up this cry of pain seeking understanding:

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

Not so we can go back to business as usual, anymore than New Orleans, say, when the last dab of new paint is slapped on the last restored building will somehow be exactly what it used to be before Katrina. No, that's not the point. Isaiah has his mind on not just a restoration, as though the people of God can go back to something that was, but a re-creation, a new creation of something that is not yet. So whatever has ended in terms of his people's trust relationship with God, there is still room in their imagination for a new beginning; and that's why Isaiah pulls himself together before this text is over, and utters that hopeful word "Yet:" "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." We get that, as clay, we've never been very good at making the pot ourselves. We get that clay is shaped by forces completely beyond its own control, and when the shape doesn't turn out right, the potter smashes the clay and starts over; and that's the way we read our history with you, O God. Yet...now, in this moment, we are begging you to tear open the heavens and come down and—remembering once more your age-old promises to us—to work with us again in forming out of us something new.

There's a fancy theological term called "Deus Absconditus"—God has absconded, abandoned ship, ducked out the back and gone, and God is now for all practical purposes absent, God has left the building—and, God knows, in this terrifying world in which we live, we can be forgiven for believing that, from time to time. The good news, though, is that Isaiah is not willing to go there—not ultimately. For all of his trust issues, there is still in his mind not just an ending, but a beginning, too—not just epilogue, but also prologue. He doesn't know the precise time and form in which his lament will be answered; so, on this evening, let's suspend, if we can, the fact that we do know that. Because Advent is not, finally, about the coming of sweet little Jesus boy, but about the second coming of Jesus Christ our King. It's not about the one who is laid in a manger, but rather about the triumphant one who in the fullness of time will rip open the heavens again in order to come back and intervene and clean up and redeem the world, once and for all; so that Isaiah's people and people everywhere can finally behold the arrival of their own future. It's a future they can't create anymore than a lump of clay can create a pot; but it is, all the same, a future they can expect and watch for.

Over the last several years, I have come to know a wonderful man named Devison T. Banda. He is a new friend, and I am grateful to God for our friendship. He was born in a village out in the bush in the sub-Saharan nation of Zambia on the African continent. He grew up with nothing, but, by the grace of God, some-

body noticed him and he was educated in a boys' school and ultimately went on to receive a divinity degree and then a Ph.D. in New Testament. He pastored for a while, and now he is the president of the seminary that trained him—the Justo Mwale Theological College in Zambia's capital city, Lusaka. It's a seminary of the burgeoning Presbyterian and Reformed churches in that part of Africa, and our two seminaries have forged an institutional relationship—I've been there, and he's been to Austin. Back in May, he and his wife Monica were with us again for almost ten days, and he was our commencement speaker. He is a gifted man and highly respected in Africa.

When he was just starting out in his first parish, though, Devison and Monica and the two children they already had were dirt-poor, and so was his church. There was no pantry shower, as is our American custom, for the new pastor. In their first week, all they had was a little food and a little money, and no one brought anything. No one had anything. When the food ran out, all they had left was what they call "mealy-meal"—corn meal from which they make a staple in that country called nshima, something sort of like what we call grits. They had mealy-meal, and that was it.

One morning, at the beginning of the day, as the family sat for their prayers, Devison says that he prayed, "Lord, you passed us by yesterday; but in your providence don't pass us by again today, yet in all things may your name be praised." The day went by and no food came; and at prayers the next morning, he said, "Lord, you passed us by again, but surely you stopped by someone else's house; but in your providence don't pass us by again today, yet in all things may your name be praised." That day again nothing, and finally on the third day, food came.

But it's that prayer that sticks with me. In its own way, it, too, is a lament—poignant and ultimately expectant. "You passed us by again today, yet in all things may your name be praised."

Here at the beginning of Advent, that's our prayer—until God tears open the heavens and comes down.

Notes

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1998), pp. 17-19.
2. Thanks to the Rev. Louis H. Zbinden, a faculty member at Austin Seminary and a long-time friend and confidante of Dr. Banda, for sharing this story.

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