

November 29—Advent 1
Isaiah 63:16b-17, 64:1-8

“Let me see you...looking left, looking right..., distractions seem to pull you out of view...” These words come from the newest song by the Lutheran group, Koiné. At times, like that song, we yearn to see God and observe his presence in our lives. Centuries before Jesus came, the prophet Isaiah expressed the same desire. “*Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and come down!*” (64:17). Like the song, Isaiah’s longing is our fervent desire as well. We too exclaim. **Heavenly Father: rip open the heavens and come down!**

Because the portion of Isaiah has so many pictures, we will look at it in two sections. The first portion is from 63:16-17 and 64:1-4.

^{16b}*You, the LORD, are our Father.*

Our Redeemer from everlasting is your name.

¹⁷*Why do you cause us to wander from your ways, LORD?
Why do you harden our heart so that we do not fear you?*

*Return for the sake of your servants,
the tribes that are your heritage...*

64 *Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and come down.
Mountains then would quake because of your presence.*

²*As fire ignites stubble and as fire makes water boil,
make your name known to your adversaries.*

Then nations would quake in your presence.

³*You did amazing things that we did not expect.*

You came down. Mountains quaked because of your presence.

⁴*From ancient times no one has heard.*

No ear has understood.

*No eye has seen any god except you,
who goes into action for the one who waits for him.*

Return, Oh Lord, our Father!

In the words we just read, Isaiah exclaims, “*You, the LORD, are our Father. Our Redeemer from everlasting is your name* (63:16). You have always loved us; you made us your children when you called Abraham and made him the father from whom our Savior would come to rescue us from our sins and from the eternal punishment we deserved.

Even so, it feels like you have been hiding your face from us. *Return, Oh Lord, our Father!* (63:17) **Rip open the heavens, come down** (64:1). Make the mountains quake; come like a fire that causes dry brush to burst in flame and makes water boil (64:1,2). Reveal your glory and power. Make nations tremble before you (64:2). Make those who oppose you flee, make them quake in fear.

You did this in the past (64:3). At the Red Sea, when our forefathers were fleeing from slavery and thought they were trapped by the Egyptian army, you opened a path through the sea and saved our people. Then you gave us your holy commandments at Mount Sinai. Smoke covered the mountain, and it shook when you descended in fire (Exodus 19:18).

When the prophet Elijah for the northern part of our land offered you a sacrifice while false prophets offered their sacrifice to the idol Baal, you sent fire to consume Elijah’s sacrifice that was drenched with water; your fire consumed even the stone altar itself (1 Kings 18:25ff).

But many refused to see your glory; they closed their eyes and hardened their hearts against you. They kept worshiping a useless idol. In judgment you “*hardened [their] heart so that [they would] not fear you*” (63:17). The northern tribes of Israel were carried off into captivity by the Assyrians, never to return.

Isaiah's prayer is our fervent desire. **Heavenly Father: Come down! Rip open the heavens** before us today. In the words of that Koiné song, "Let me see you, let me see you..." In Scripture God responds, "I have revealed my presence to you as your everlasting Father and Redeemer. Heaven and earth declare my glory. Have you not noticed how earth itself bears evidence that I created it just some 6,000 years ago, just as I said in Scripture?"

- Microbiologists peer into a single cell of a living organism. Just one cell is so intricate that even over billions of years it would be statistically impossible for a simple organism to develop through natural causes—it would be as if this church built itself.
- Do you not know that blood cells have been found in dinosaur bones? Those cells would have disintegrated if they lived more than a few thousand years ago. The dinosaurs may be the massive reptiles described in the Old Testament book of Job (40:15-18).
- Do you not know that the gradual changes in the y chromosome of men point to a common ancestor about 180 generations ago, about the time of Noah and the Great Flood?

Many refuse to look at the evidence. They close their eyes to what God has revealed and worship gods of their own imagination.

But not everyone; some see God's presence even as a remnant remained faithful to the true God, while he protected the faithful from foreign enemies. God went into action because of his mercy and love for his people—he was keeping his promise to send the Savior. (64:4).

God our eternal Father sent the Savior. Jesus Christ was born of Mary and conceived by the Holy Spirit. God went into action to save his people. He accomplished what no false god or human being could ever do. That fact brings us to the second portion of the words from Isaiah. We read 65:5-8.

*⁵You meet anyone who joyfully practices righteousness,
who remembers you by walking in your ways!*

But you were angry because we sinned.

We have remained in our sins for a long time.

*⁶All of us have become like something unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like a filthy cloth.*

*All of us have withered like a leaf,
and our guilt carries us away like the wind.*

*⁷There is no one who calls on your name,
who rouses himself to take hold of you.*

So you hid your face from us.

You made us melt by the power of our guilt.

⁸But now, LORD, you are our father.

We are the clay, and you are our potter.

All of us are the work of your hand.

Make us, oh Father, the work of your hand

If we had not read this second portion from Isaiah, we might think that we are somehow better than all those who close their eyes and harden their hearts so that they do not recognize and believe in the true God. We could act like that Pharisee in the temple, whom Jesus described in a parable. The Pharisee stood at the front of the temple, raised his eyes toward heaven, and thanked God he was not a sinner like the tax-collector in the rear of the temple. The Pharisee exclaimed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income" (Luke 18:11,12).

If we only read the first part of verse 5, we might think like that Pharisee: Father, "*you meet anyone who joyfully practices righteousness, who remembers you by walking in your ways!*" (64:5). Like the

Pharisee we might say: "Lord, you come to me because we walk in your ways. We earned your presence. We opened the heavens and come up to you." We would be wrong.

The rest of verse 5 forces us to recognize something else entirely: "*You were angry because we sinned. We have remained in our sins for a long time*" (v 5). We must tell that proud, self-righteous voice in us: "We cannot earn the right to be in God's presence. We cannot open the heavens and come to you."

Our actions may look righteous and decent to us and others, but those deeds do not earn God's mercy and forgiveness. If God would not see us covered in white robes washed in the blood of Christ, if he would see us as we are by nature; he would see our sins. Even the actions that look good to others and us according to our natural way of thinking are unclean before God. Isaiah says it this way: "*All of us have become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like a filthy cloth.*" (v 6). This is what the Apostle Paul taught us: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Jesus does say that our lives as his disciples indicate our faith in him. On Judgment Day Jesus will say: "I was hungry, and you gave me food ... I was a stranger and you welcomed me... I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:35,36). But...

- How consistently do we in fact feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned?
- Taking care of the sick is hard. It drains energy and tests patience.
- To visit a prisoner, we would go through intense security checks, hear jail doors slam shut and think about ending the visit quickly.
- We become weary in doing good to others. Our righteous acts are contaminated with sin.

Isaiah said: "*All of us have withered like a leaf, and our guilt carries us away like the wind*" (v 6). The Apostle Paul says this describes the way we were before God brought us to Jesus Christ: we "were dead in ... trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). Isaiah says the same thing about our natural way of thinking: "*There is no one who calls on your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you*" (v 7). By nature, we would not listen to God, worship him, or pray to him. "*So you hid your face from us. You made us melt by the power of our guilt*" (v 7). Left to ourselves, God's Word would remain a closed book. We would not see what God has done for us. The thought of meeting God at death would grip our hearts in fear.

"*But now, LORD, you are our father*" (v 8), Isaiah goes on to say. How can this be? Jesus has the answer. Hear what he said: "Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father...believe me" (John 14:9, 11). Jesus shed his innocent blood for us. He rescued us from the eternal punishment we deserved for our sins. Go back to the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee in the temple and look to the back of temple. See there the tax collector beating his chest and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Jesus said of him: "I tell you, this man went home justified" (Luke 18:13,14).

The Apostle Paul put it this way, "God, because he is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in trespasses. It is by grace you have been saved!" (Ephesians 2:4,5).

Isaiah says it this way, "*We are the clay, and you are our potter. All of us are the work of your hand*" (v 8).

The Apostle Paul writes, "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10). The works we do from faith in Christ are pleasing to God not to earn salvation, but because he graciously accepts them as good works—Jesus' righteousness covers our unrighteousness.

Rip open the heavens and come down, O heavenly Father. Brothers and sisters in Christ, he has done that. He sent his Son to redeem us from our sins. Amen.