

“Oh That You Would Come Down!”

“Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down...” God, Islamic extremists went on a killing rampage in Mumbai this week, slaughtering nearly 200 innocent people who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. “Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down...” Loving Creator of our beautiful planet, we continue to foul our own nest with poisons that pour into our streams and our skies, killing the animals and plants for which you charged us to care, choking our sisters and brothers in the cities, drowning and displacing the poor in the deltas and tidewaters. “Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down...” Tender Mother of us all, in preparation for celebrating Jesus’ birth, bargain-hunters in New York State burst through a Wal-Mart door on Friday and fatally trampled an employee. “Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down...” God of Justice, we read of those in Thailand and Burma struggling to secure the liberties we take for granted, yet here in this country, where the Statue of Liberty symbolizes our most cherished civic ideals, we are told that the liberties of some must be sacrificed for the security of all, though we know that true security comes only from you. “Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down...” Merciful Father, there are those whom we love who are ill, when the physicians say there is no cure; there are those we know who are homeless and no one will help; there are those who are dying alone and those who merely pass by. “Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down...” O God who charged us to look after orphans, there will be 6,000 more of them today who have lost their parents to AIDS, yet still some hesitate at doing what is needed to control the epidemic. “Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down...” O Protector of the Poor, the economic princes of our time maintain their power even in the aftermath of failure, while those who stand for the common worker are excoriated as the source of economic collapse. “Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down...”

It is easy for us to understand, even to identify with, the anger and despair that come pouring out of the prophet in our reading from Isaiah this morning. As we listen to or read the news, as we see the pain in each other’s eyes, hear the concerns and fears of our friends and family, it’s easy to say, “These are troubled times, perilous times.” This passage in Isaiah was written during troubled and perilous times. There is disagreement among scholars as to whether this scripture was written during the Exile in Babylon or if it came from the period after the return to Jerusalem, when the joy of return had given way to the disillusionment of the slow work of rebuilding. In either case, it is a message to those for whom the present looks bleak and the future uncertain. Some scholars see the verses from 63:7 – 64:11 as a psalm of lamentation or intercession. The themes are confession and a plea for God to intercede, even on behalf of a wayward people.

As is so often the case, the dispirited remnant of Israel was looking for a dramatic answer to their problems. The prophet’s plea to God was for a spectacular theophany, a divine appearance that would be unmistakable, that would seize the attention of all. The imagery is like that of Exodus 19, when God came down to give the Law to Moses: “Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently.” Isaiah asks for God to come with the suddenness and power that one sees when dry brush is sparked by flame, brown and inert at one moment, then crackling and blazing, or when placid-looking hot water goes from a gentle steaming to a rolling, roiling boil.

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Of course, when one expects such an action from God, then God’s lack of action or delay in action seems unaccountable. Lurking under verses 3, 4 and 5 is an unspoken question: if God hasn’t come down yet, isn’t coming down now, why not? Are we truly God’s Chosen People? The fear that God will not respond produces some pretty standard human coping and bargaining mechanisms. First, there is what might be considered an appeal to God’s vanity: O God, when you did this for us before, it was just amazing! “When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.” Then there is the reminder that Israel is, after all, in a special relationship with their adored God. As Bill Cosby’s Noah says to God when the rains begin, “it’s me and you Lord, me and you all the way.” “From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.” Finally, in the last half of verse five, there would appear to be some blame-shifting. “We’re only in this mess because you weren’t around.” “But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.” Of course, to be fair, there are multiple translations of this clause because of what scholars call “obscure Hebrew.”

The confession of sin, of transgression, and the acknowledgement of the continued absence of God in majesty, swooping down from the heavens to right all wrongs, leads to a more sober assessment of the spiritual condition of the people. “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.” The content of these verses is perhaps more familiar to us from the letter of Paul to the Romans. “We have all become like one who is unclean” finds its parallel in “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” while the sense that one’s most intentional righteousness has become filth is echoed in Paul’s description of inner conflict: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Isaiah’s plea for the God of Heaven to come down and strike, punish and change ends in the realization that the change that is needed includes God’s people themselves.

I suspect that once the prophet or the people for whom he lifted his voice began to consider what it would really mean for God to come with cataclysmic change, they began to rethink their request. They had, after all, seen such change in their lives or in their recent national history, change they attributed to Almighty God but which did not satisfy their grievances or leave them as the justified lords of all they surveyed. It was the armies of Judah that had fallen, their nobles who had been killed or banished, their Temple which had been looted and burned. God had brought justice but it had come against them for all the ways in which they had failed – their disregard of the poor and the stranger, their failure to take God’s way into their hearts. Maybe, the Avenging Warrior God wasn’t really someone they wanted in their lives.

As we read this passage to begin our Advent season, we can hear the anger and despair of the people who cried out for the God of Fire and Earthquake and we can understand their desire for apocalyptic change that would destroy evil and enthrone good. It is easy to cry out, “Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down...” It is easy to pray, “You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth. Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore

“Oh That You Would Come Down!”

us, O Eternal One, God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” But, thanks be to God, we turn naturally at this time of year to other stories of God’s rescue of humankind. We remember that night in the Judean hills, when the heavens were opened and the heavenly host came down, not with fire and a battle cry, but with a word of peace and the cry of a newborn baby. We remember that day on the banks of the Jordan, when, as Mark tells us using the same words as Isaiah, as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens rent, torn apart. And God came down that day, not with a mighty sword to make the nations tremble, but as a dove, the gentle bird of peace, to infuse God’s Son with the Holy Spirit of love and wisdom and truth. As Talitha Arnold wrote of our Psalm this morning, “God answered the demand, ‘Let your face shine that we might be saved,’ though not as anyone expected. Not in a return to the glory days of the past, but in the light of the Child born in Bethlehem, the light the darkness has never overcome.”

When we look around at all the systemic and personal evil in our world and wring our hands and say, “Why doesn’t God do something,” we are simply looking for the wrong God. When I am tempted to pray for the angry God of judgment to come and smite the wicked and restore the broken, I remember the words of a faithful child of Israel. Elie Wiesel tells the story in his memoir of the Holocaust, Night. He remembers that day in the concentration camp at Buna when the Germans hung some prisoners they had connected to weapons smuggled into the camp. One of the condemned was a young boy, known to all the prisoners for his gentle ways and his “beautiful and delicate face – an incredible sight in this camp,” Wiesel recalls. “His was the face of an angel in distress.” When the sentence was carried out, the boy was too light to die immediately from the hanging and the prisoners were forced to watch his struggles. “Where is merciful God, where is He?” Wiesel heard someone ask. A few minutes later, the same man said, “For God’s sake, where is God?” “And from within me,” Wiesel writes, “I heard a voice answer: ‘Where is He? This is where – hanging here from this gallows...’” God is not absent when people are brutalized, when they suffer from injustice or apathy. God is not away off in heaven when we are in need. When people are in trouble, God is so close to them as to be one with them. If we are looking for God to come down from a Heavenly Throne in power, we are looking at the wrong place.

Our God is near to us, not rearranging our lives with violent justice but patiently reshaping us with loving righteousness. “O Lord, you are our Father,” Isaiah wrote; “we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” God does not come down in a single, earth-shattering act but slowly, continuously works in our lives in an ongoing work of creation, pinching us here, smoothing us there, as we become what God intended us to be from the beginning. It is, in its own way, a far more awesome and mighty kind of work than the sudden invasion of human life that Isaiah and his fellows first envisioned, for it is more difficult by far too slowly bend the free will of stiff-necked humanity to the way of life than to simply destroy the enemy and elevate the chosen.

We are called to be the clay in our Father’s hands, malleable and yielding rather than demanding. My friend and former boss Jeannette Cliff George often includes in her teaching the wry observation that she is awfully good at telling God just what to do and how to do it. Dan Bollerud writes, “When God seems distant, it is usually because we are looking the wrong way, inward instead of outward. The solution is to stop trying to run the show ourselves and let God

“Oh That You Would Come Down!”

take control. Instead of the clay telling the potter what it should look like and function as, perhaps the clay should let the potter be the one who forms what will be. From dust we came and to dust we shall return, but in the mean time, God has been able to form that dust into vessels of beauty, if we let him. We call them the saints. God calls them the children of God. It is most of us sometimes and some of us most of the time.”

But being the Father’s clay doesn’t mean we are supposed to be putty for just anyone’s hands. We are called to stand against injustice and to not let ourselves be conformed to the world of self-interest. But when we make our stand for God and God’s people, it is to be done as Jesus taught, with gentleness and meekness; upholding human dignity by turning the other cheek and going the extra mile, not by seizing the sword against the aggressor. It is hard work, this work to which we are called. But we can accomplish it by preparing for the everyday advent of the Spirit of Jesus into our hearts. We can accomplish it by becoming like the clay for our Heavenly Potter. We can accomplish it by allowing our longing for the One who tears open the heavens and comes down to kindle a fire not on the earth but in our souls. Even now as we wait to celebrate the coming of Immanuel as a babe in a manger, let us dare to hope. Amen.