

Isaiah 64:1-9 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

64 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

²^[a] 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!

³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

⁴From 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.

⁵You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.

But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.^[b]

⁶We 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.

⁷There 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^[c] us into the hand of our iniquity.

⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

The Coming of the Son of Man

²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he^[a] is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The Necessity for Watchfulness

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert;^[b] for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

December 3, 2017 (COMMUNION)

Isaiah 64:1-9

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Sin. Iniquity. Falling Short. Missing the mark. Messing up. Transgressing.

God gets fed up with our sin.

God is grieved by our rebellion.

God hates that we grab at power AND that we accept powerlessness in the face of evil.

God gets furious when we forget who God is.

Repent. Stay awake. Prepare your heart. Get it right.

Isaiah says, *O that you would tear open the heavens and get down here so that the mountains would quake in your presence.*

Show yourself God. And make us whole again.

So, what is sin?

Why does sin matter so much to God?

And how do we get right with God again?

Those are the big questions, aren't they?

And they show up now, as the world is getting darker, and the days are getting shorter, and our patience is getting thinner, and the suffering is getting worse.

And they show up now, as we remember that we were promised a Savior.

And they show up now, as we fret about the horrors and hypocrisy in our world, or instead distract ourselves with Christmas busyness.

Sin. We sin. Daily. Knowingly. Unknowingly. As individuals. And by being a part of larger systems and structures that have been built on sinful premises.

But getting a handle on the definition of sin is slippery. It always has been.

Roman, Western Christianity argued Augustine's premise that people are born in sin.

The Reformed tradition took John Calvin's description of total depravity and ran with it.

And today's believers call for the definitive checklist of sins so they will know who is destined for hell and who isn't.

And today's skeptics wonder if counting up sins is just another way to control people.

The church - fully embraced the business of saving people from their sin – whatever that means.

Now saving people from sin probably isn't such a bad business – but when the definition of sin narrows

The church becomes arbiter rather than teacher, and the practice becomes prevention.

How do we prevent ourselves from sinning?

I'm not sure we can. So - the church has made promises it can't truly deliver.

We trust mother church to give us a list and make us follow the rules with the threat of hell.

The problem is – that hasn't been working so well for us.

It never has.

Jesus was continually frustrated by the rule followers trying to save themselves -

When the biblical narrative reminds us that God has been there all along, and knows us, and loves us anyway in spite of ourselves.

Biblically, we can describe sin as breaking commandments and going back on covenants.

The prophets described sin as manifestations of injustice and oppression.

Jesus describes sin as lack of love and compassion – especially for the hungry, lonely, and captive.

And thanks to some New Testament writings, we have characterized sin as unbelief –

Which sometimes gets turned into sin as “having the wrong doctrine.”

Augustine was right that sin is inescapable, original to human life, and deep.

Calvin was right that sin touches every aspect of our lives, and the potential for evil is in everyone.

And modern Christians, both believers and skeptics, are right in their search to do what is good in the world, gaining a greater chance of glimpsing heaven right here on earth.

We sin. Timidly or boldly. Specifically or generally. We just do.

Why does it matter to God? What has God got to lose by our behavior?

Is it like a parent who wants their kids to act right in public?

Is it like a judge waiting to offer a harsh sentence for what we’ve done wrong?

If the stories about God are correct, and God will love us steadfastly through it all,

Should it even matter that we try to do what is right?

But from reading our sacred texts, and listening to Jesus’ words, we know that human life with all its consequences matters to God.

God is genuinely grieved when we succumb to practices that betray our commitment to God or hurt our fellow human beings.

God is angered by our apathy. When nothing about life matters.

God is perturbed by our desire for control – when we want to be keepers of the rules.

God is OK with us when we get mad at God.

God can certainly handle our anger at injustice and the things that are unfair – in fact God shares that anger with us.

What seems to be most aggravating to God is when we forget all that God has done for us,

When we take for granted this life that is 100% gift to us.

God wants our enjoyment, our delight, our amazement at life itself.

Jesus said in one of his more profound moments, “I came that they may have life, and have it in abundance.”

So sin, the kind of sin that diminishes life, does matter. Turning away from evil makes a difference.

Having a relationship with God is what God wants from us.

God calls out prophets, and writes it on our hearts, and sends us Jesus to make it known.

So it's not just about being in the business of saving people from their sin that matters.

Yes, we should teach repentance, and staying awake, and being prepared, and all those good things.

But it's also about developing the understanding that this life is a school of love.

Sometimes that school's lessons are taught through joy, and other times taught through pain.

That's not my original idea – but it's one that has had its champions throughout the centuries.

Sin is pervasive and total, we can't lose sight of its power to twist and turn us.

And yet, we sometimes forget that it was in goodness that we were created.

It was in love that we were shepherded through our darkest nights.

It is in our hearts that God writes the words of life.

And it is in Jesus' teaching, AND in Jesus' sacrifice that the love of God is made known,

And even death loses its sting.

We have been taught about this badness in us that needs to be fixed –

And yet God keeps sending us reminders that there is good in us that simply needs to be uncovered.

Sin will catch us, and wound us, and blind us, and mount up to where it seems they are unchangeable.

But God can be trusted – even when, as Isaiah says, our most righteous moments are like a filthy rag,

Even when the worst in us is all that we have seen for days.

We repent – not so God will love us – but so we will remember to love ourselves.

We stay awake – so that on our watch – we notice what still needs doing in our world today.

We are prepared – so that we are willing to be God's hands and voice of love.

To get right with God – we ask, we pray, we make amends with those we have hurt.

We don't have to earn God's favor, we already have love more than we can imagine and much more than we deserve.

God will do the saving – as God has always done.

Sin's power may be hiding us from that love, turning us away from that love.

But it CANNOT stop that love.

So when times grow dark, and the sin of the world seems overwhelming,

We can stop and remember what God has done before.

Isaiah does that. The prophets always remember.

But Isaiah does something else, he calls upon God's power to shake us from our stupor,

To come down here to earth until the mountains tremble,

To fan the flames until the water is boiling.

The prophets don't just see individual sins and our need for repentance.

No, they see the bigger picture, the sinfulness that is broad in scope and requires Godly intervention.

The church has been a place where we try to save people by introducing them to the love of Jesus.

At times, in those same communities, we catch the next step and imagine all of life as that school of love.

But what Isaiah is talking about is wide open, nation to nation, global, corporate, world-altering sin.

I dare say that our little church, or even capital "C" Church can feel rather unprepared for that kind of battle.

But when the time comes, God's messengers, the prophets and angels and truth-tellers, trust us with exactly that kind of battle.

We are called to armor up and get in there.

We are allowed to invoke this mighty power of God to ally with the forces of good for a great reckoning.

It may feel like the world is shaking up and boiling over as light comes to banish the darkness.

These metaphors still ring true for us, and they scare us half to death.

But as we listen to Isaiah over these four Sundays of Advent – you will hear his immense trust in God and God's power alone.

You will hear his range of emotions from comfort, to anger, to sadness, to joy.

And I think his prophetic voice will prepare us to receive the Savior,

The one who preaches the love of God for sinners just like us,

The one who loves us so much it will transform us and make us new. Amen.