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Work To Do

Isaiah 64:8

“Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” How often have you prayed that prayer? How often have you raised your voice and eyes to the heavens and shouted, “Come down here God! Show yourself! Tear open this world so it will never be the same!” How often have you acted this way? Spoken these things? Well, pretty much every week. Every time we worship we are praying this prayer. We are asking God to show up, tear through the place and change everything. In fact, our order of service is loosely based on what would happen if God did show up. Way back in chapter 6 of his book Isaiah experiences what I’m talking about. Isaiah was visiting the holiest part of the temple when the columns and floors began to shake, the place filled with smoke and God showed up in the sanctuary, so large that even the hem of his robe could barely fit in the room. Upon seeing this, Isaiah fell to into despair and confessed his sinfulness. A hot coal was put to his mouth, cleansing him and feeding him a new word. Then God asked Isaiah, “Who can I send into this world to share my message?” and Isaiah says that he will go. Boom! The man Isaiah becomes the prophet Isaiah and he spends the rest of his life speaking and living God’s word in the world.

And this is exactly what we are doing in worship too! I know, I know, every year I explain this to our confirmation class and they don’t believe me either. But it is true! In our worship we begin by calling on God to join us. We ask for God to show up here. Then, because we know that if God really did show up not only would the columns shake but we would too. If God were to appear here and now then, like Isaiah, you can bet we would start confessing our sins! We hear the word of God read and spoken, we take in bread and wine; all in our effort to burn away the old life and get fed a new life. Then, as we leave this place, we are given a blessing but also a charge: a charge to leave this place not just the man or woman who came in but one who has been changed by the presence of God in this place; a charge to be the one God sends into the world.

So, yes, just about every week we offer this plea from Isaiah: Tear open the heavens and get down here God, we pray. Come and join us like the old days, like when the sanctuary filled with smoke, or your robe filled the place or when you made the mountains quake. Come again, we pray, and change the world. It is a prayer that takes on particular fervor during the season of Advent, the season we begin tonight. As Christians we pray, “Tear open the heavens Jesus! Get down here for the world needs to be changed. There is so much work here for you to do.” In Mark’s gospel Jesus describes what it will look like when he comes and it sounds like a pretty good answer to our prayer. Mark says Jesus will come in great clouds of glory and gather us up from the ends of the earth and both heaven and the earth will be forever changed.

There is only one problem. God isn’t answering the prayer. Or, at least, the answer is not “yes.” God is not tearing open the heavens. God is not filling this room with smoke. God is not shaking the foundations of our world. Isaiah may have it right when he says, “you have hidden your face from us God.” Perhaps we have not just overlooked God’s mighty presence. Perhaps that mighty presence simply is not here. Isaiah has heard about the amazing acts of God from the past, about the seas splitting and the mountains quaking but he has noticed that the people of Israel don’t get that kind of action anymore. *We* don’t get that kind of action anymore. No mighty hand has reached down recently

and changed this world. Though we pray for it, “Tear open the heavens and get down here!” , though our worship reflects our desire for it, still God does not do it. Not for Isaiah during this time in his ministry and not, so far, for us. We do not get a mighty being who will get to work changing the world. We get, as Isaiah puts it, a potter who will shape and change us.

The Old Testament does not often use this term “potter” for God. In fact, only a handful of times is God called a potter and all of them come to us from Isaiah. What may surprise you is that the Old Testament also rarely uses the term “father” for God. Jesus used the term all the time but it was not commonly used during Isaiah’s time. So when he says, “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter” his prayer has changed. He is not praying to an abstract power, he is praying to a vulnerable God who is as close to him as the hands of a potter is close to her clay. A potter is not going to “tear open the heavens”. A potter does not change the world. And that is why Isaiah’s prayer changes. It does not change because it is a bad prayer. We should want God to be close to us. The prayer changes because it is not the world that needs to be changed. It is not the world that needs to be worked on. It is you and me.

Did you catch it in Jesus’ description of his return? We can rush right past it but Jesus here is not concerned, upon his second arrival, with the world or with our enemies or with our situations. He is concerned with the state we are in. Are we ready? Have we been changed and shaped by God? Are we awake in our faith? In the days of the early church, certain congregations practiced times of examination. They were not examining the outside world or even one another, they were called to examine themselves, their own conscience. Their examination was simple. All they were to ask themselves was how their behavior of that day reflected or neglected their life as one of God’s children. That was it. That one question was their one concern. How have I done today? Just today? And then tomorrow, ask the question again. It is an examination that will show us the work we have to do, the work we need God to do on us. Even in Isaiah’s time, God did not change world. God only changed Isaiah. We can pray for a mighty hand to change this world or our situation. We can pray for it but it is not what we really need. What we really need is the hand of the potter who can shape us, slowly and over time. Slowly and over time, God our potter will shape us and, in this way, our God of might will change the world. Amen.