

Lord, Come Down

Isaiah 64:1-9

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

Philadelphia Presbyterian Church

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Before I read the scripture this morning, please take out the bulletin insert so you can follow along as I read. And then keep it handy because I'm going to highlight several verses as we go through the sermon this morning.

Isaiah 64:1-9

Well, the post-Thanksgiving shopping madness has begun. You read the headlines: there were robberies in mall parking lots; one lady shot pepper spray on other shoppers so she could get the best deal on a big screen TV. And there's the whole idea of "Black Friday" and "Cyber Monday" and buying stuff. When I read about all this craziness—especially with the spirit of Thanksgiving less than 24 hours old, it makes me wonder if this is what the Pilgrims had in mind when they came to the new world. They had such high hopes when they came here. John Winthrop had the wonderful vision that they would establish this new land as a "city set on a hill." A light to the nations. In a sermon that he preached on board the ship just before they landed, here's how John Winthrop described how he hoped life in America would be: "We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoyce together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body."

For the Puritans their fundamental criterion of success in this new land was not material wealth and prosperity of the individual, but the creation of a community in which a genuinely ethical and spiritual life could be lived.

In one particularly cold winter, one of John Winthrop's neighbors told him that a man had been stealing wood from Winthrop's woodpile. So Winthrop went to the man who was stealing from him and said that since this was such a severe winter and because this man was in need that he could help himself from Winthrop's woodpile as long as he needed to do so. Then Winthrop went to his neighbor who had reported the thievery and told him that he had cured the man of stealing (*Habits of the Heart*, p. 28-29).

They had such high hopes.

But somehow between then and now things have gone in a different direction. "We, Us, Ours" has been replaced by "I, me and mine."

This isn't the way it was supposed to be.

For a while we had this wonderful idea that with advancements in agriculture and technology, there would be enough food so that no one in the world would go hungry. And, as I understand it, there is enough food to feed the world, but still we read about famine in Africa and Asia, and many other places around the world. I read recently that 6 million children die each year from hunger causes. We see scenes with people starving while the trucks loaded with food relief are tied up in some bureaucratic red tape.

This isn't the way it was supposed to be.

Forty years ago there was such hope that the racial injustice that was a part of our society could be brought down. Martin Luther King dreamed of a day when people are judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin, and we applauded. But racism is as real now as it ever was.

It isn't supposed to be this way.

Ask people to describe the world in which we live, and you will often hear words like "cold" and "cruel." Parents teach their children to be cautious, wary, slow to trust others. I remember a conversation I had with a young mother who was talking about her 8-year-old son. She said with some regret that her son "trusted everybody." Her son was having a problem at school because another student was taking her son's homework papers and turning them in as his own. But her son just refused to believe that anyone would do that. And he insisted that there must be another explanation for the missing papers. Then she said, "I guess he'll learn as he grows up that people can't be trusted."

Wait a minute; it's not supposed to be like that.

I have to confess that sometimes I find it all pretty discouraging. The problems seem so big, and so far beyond anything that we can do. I wonder if there is any way out of this.

Well, it will probably come as no surprise to you that this is not the first time in human history when people have felt this way. You can even see it in the Bible.

This morning's scripture comes from Isaiah, when the people were wondering the same thing. This passage is easier to understand if you know a little about what was happening to the Hebrew people, so as I have done a couple of times recently when I have been preaching from the Old Testament, I want to take a moment and set this passage in its historical context.

The tiny nation of Israel had known days of relative peace and prosperity under King David and King Solomon. But unfortunately it didn't last too long. As other surrounding nations got stronger, it became clear what a weak nation Israel really was. After a couple of hundred years of kings who were varying degrees of corrupt, the Assyrian army came in and defeated Israel in war. Then about 120 years later, the Babylonian armies came in and finished the job. After the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, the leading citizens of Israel were deported to Babylon where they lived in slavery. For fifty years they lived in Babylon, longing to go home, longing for the day when they would once again live in the land they loved and once again worship in the temple in Jerusalem.

And then it happened. By the edict of Cyrus, King of Persia, the Hebrews who were captive in Babylon were allowed to return home. Can you imagine what they must have felt as they made that trek across the desert from Babylon to their homeland Israel? Surely they were filled with great anticipation and high hope.

But when they got home, they came crashing down to reality. When they returned, they found a country devastated by war. The city walls of Jerusalem were torn down, and the temple—the beautiful temple—was a pile of rubble. It wasn't supposed to be that way. Surely there were some who wanted to give up; it was just too big a job. We can't do this, they thought.

That was what was going on when Isaiah voiced the helplessness of the people in this prayer to God. Sometimes a prophet like Isaiah brought God's word to the people,

but other times Isaiah was the spokesman for the people to God. Isaiah took to God the concerns of the people, and here's what Isaiah prayed to God:

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence.” (v. 1)

“Lord, come down,” they prayed. This is too great a task for us. Only you can make things right.

As you read these verses, you see that Isaiah takes several approaches to try to convince God to come to the aid of the people. First Isaiah tries to jog God's memory.

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

As if God might have forgotten, Isaiah is reminding God of that time at the Exodus when God led the people out of slavery in Egypt, and when the mountains did quake at Mt. Sinai. “Remember, God? You did it once before when we were in trouble. Remember? We were in Egypt and we cried to you and you came and saved us. Remember? You did this miraculous thing before; you can do it again.”

And then Isaiah tries another approach: flattery.

“No eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.” (v. 4)

The Hebrew people had just come from Babylon, and they had seen how ineffective the idols of Babylonian religion were. When trouble came, those idols became a burden and had to be loaded on donkeys and oxen and carried in wagons to be taken to safety. When the trouble came, the idols were not a help but a burden. But our God, on the other hand, comes to us in time of trouble. God works for those who wait on God.

And as a last appeal, Isaiah reminds God how helpless the people are. “We are nothing, God. Just a bunch of sinners here. We do our best and still we are like filthy rags. We're like trying to wash a window with a dirty rag. Our best efforts leave nothing but streaks.” (v. 6)

“Come down, God, we need you,” Isaiah prays.

We could pray that same prayer. The problems that surround us are too big for us; only God can make things right.

But then, as if some new thought has come into his mind—it's in verse 8—Isaiah says, “Wait a minute. What are we anxious about? God is the Father; we are God's children. God is the potter; we are the clay. We are the work of God's hand. God made us; we belong to God. God is the one who is in charge here. What are we so anxious about?” It was as if it dawned on Isaiah that he could trust that God, in God's time, would do what was needed for God's children because that's who God is. So we are called to wait and trust in God.

And so it is for us. When we get discouraged about the problems of the world and the problems of our lives—about racism or world hunger or our inhumanity toward one another, about selfishness, about sickness or personal crises—we can pray Isaiah's prayer

and remind ourselves that God is our father, and we are God's children; God is the potter molding us, the clay; we are the work of God's hand. God is at work in our world making things right.

And, of course, you know that it wasn't too many years after Isaiah offered this prayer that the very thing that Isaiah prayed for God did. God broke open the heavens and came to earth. At the time, almost no one noticed—it was just a little baby being born, nothing all that unusual. But the birth of that baby was God's supreme unexpected miraculous act; it was God's coming to make things right; it was God's coming into our lives to wash us and make us clean. Isaiah's prayer was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

Standing now where we stand in world history, we know something that Isaiah did not know. We know how this story is going to end. Even though the work of establishing God's kingdom on earth is not yet finished, we know that it will be done. We know it because of that baby that was born 2000 years ago. In Jesus Christ all our prayers are answered.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give us such faith in you that we can trust that as you came once into our world, you are coming again to make all things right. Open our eyes so that we can catch glimpses of your kingdom even now. Amen. ☩