

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence--
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!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
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.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
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.
Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

The people are disheartened and demanding. "Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved." They are waiting and watching and they are impatient. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." Feeling cut off from God and frustrated, *still* the people plead with God; *still* they hope to move God to act.

The psalmist is writing during the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom, Israel, nearly 800 years before the prophet Isaiah. Despite tremendous loss and devastation, the First Temple still stands in Jerusalem and there are likely still a handful of shrines in the north. And so, although God seems to be absent from their lives beyond Jerusalem, they find some hope knowing that God is present in the temple services. "God of hosts," they pray, "bring us back; let your face shine on us and we shall be saved."

Centuries later, but still at least 500 years before Jesus was born, Cyrus the Great, the Persian conqueror of Babylonia, gave the Jews permission to return to the southern kingdom of Judah. The verses from Third Isaiah are part of a community lament sung after some of the first Jews returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. Many of them were the children and grandchildren of those taken to Babylon decades before.

Their parents and grandparents had surely told them about Judah in all its former glory. What they encountered when they got there must have been hugely disappointing. Jerusalem had been destroyed and it would be centuries before the Second Temple was built. No wonder the prophet cried out for God to come ripping into the world making the mountains quake and the nations tremble.

There is yet another dimension to the distress. When Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, conquered Judah, he deported Jewish landowners and leadership, leaving the merchant-class and others behind to take care of the land. Those who had not been exiled clashed with the returning group over questions of status, social standing, and, ultimately, political and religious authority.

The Jews who returned from Babylon, basically immigrants by now, are the families of the elite. There is an uneasy reunion between the Levites who had been leading the exiled Jews in Babylon and the Zadokites who had been leading the Jews who stayed behind. And if that weren't enough, all the real political power is in the hands of the Persians.

The pillars of Judaism are unsteady. The Temple has been destroyed, there is conflict around religious authority, and God appears to have hidden from the people because of their sinfulness. It was a truly dark time. The Jews might well have given up. They didn't. They persevered.

They persevered by holding on to the little flicker of hope in the lament from Third Isaiah. In Hebrew, it reads: “now, YHWH our father, we are the clay and you are the one forming us and all of us are your handiwork. You must not be wrathful to excess, and you must not act on our past iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people.”

Isaiah gives voice to the yearning of a people who no longer see or hear God, people for whom God appears to be absent. The prophet laments on their behalf to God as if to say: “Where are you, YHWH? Why can’t we feel your presence like we did in the past when,” as the Hebrew says, “you performed awesome deeds for which we did not hope; when you descended, and mountains dripped before you?”

If you have ever prayed despite feeling as though you were praying into a void, you know what this feels like. If you have ever prayed for a loved one who was suffering even though you could not see or accept God’s response, you know what this feels like. If you have ever prayed through days of spiritual dryness or prayed for an answer that seemed never to come, then you, too, have known Isaiah’s prayer: “God, where are you? Tear open the heavens and come to us!”

This is essentially our Advent prayer. “Come, Lord Christ, come. Come and shape us, shape our community. We are all your people.” Our Advent begins in darkness. We light one candle to express our hope for the coming of the light of Christ. Our Advent begins with the recognition of the darkness within ourselves and in our world.

And Advent also begins with the flicker of hope in Third Isaiah’s lament and the expectation of a new day. “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”

Even in the darkness, our Advent hope is not for God to make all things as they once were. Instead, we offer ourselves as people willing to be pliable, to be flexible and receptive to God’s handiwork in our selves and in our world.

And so, just as God formed the Israelites of Third Isaiah’s day, the hand of potter will form us. God will not return us to the way things were in the past just because that might seem better or safer or less disorienting to us.

And if we are calling out to God to come with terrifying violence to exact revenge on people we don’t like or even on people who have harmed us, we

will continue to be frustrated because *that* God *is* absent. In God's own time, what God gave the ancient Jews was the grace of new perspectives, new ways of being in relationship to God, new ways of being the children of God.

The lesson for us is to open ourselves to God and allow God to work on us like the Creator who loves us. If we grant our consent, even in the stillness, maybe especially in the darkness of our uncertainty, God forms us into something incredible and useful: God's new vessel.

And so, we wait and we watch, as Mark's Jesus tells us, like the doorkeeper waiting for the homeowner to return. Now, some of us may find ourselves lamenting while we wait with Third Isaiah: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence."

That's fine.

Because the path to opening ourselves sometimes requires walking through a lament for what has been lost or for what is no longer possible. Expressing frustration to God, crying to God, pitching anger or grief to God – these are all valid interactions in a living relationship with God. And sometimes, these are more truthful and intimate than our prayers of love, gratitude and joy.

And so, whatever is on your heart this Advent, take in the promise of the psalmist while we wait in the darkness with anticipation: "And so will we never turn away from you; give us life, that we may call upon your Name." The children of God seek and always find ways to be in relationship with God.

Salvation comes in our learning to find God at work in every aspect of the real lives that we live every day. "Show the light of your countenance," the psalmist sings, "and we shall be saved." These may be words of hope, words of discouragement, or words of wonder and trust depending on each person's life circumstances. Regardless of the motivation, God is faithful to all God's children. Giving voice to our actual life circumstances gives something of ourselves that is genuine and humble for God to work with.

Advent is our precious opportunity to practice waking up, growing up, cleaning up and showing up. God grants us this holy time to practice watching for God's movement and presence in the unseen and elusive moment between the past and the future. As the past fades away and the

sands of the future shift, God recreates and renews us as God's own vessels of light.

As we practice being clay in God's loving hands, we learn to recognize and clean up the ways that we separate ourselves from God and from each other. The more we practice granting our consent for God to remake us, the more we become capable of bearing the gradually increasing light of God coming into the world. We practice until the light of God's countenance shines not only for us, but also for those around us because we are all God's people.

“Therefore, 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

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