

**Come Down Bring Us Your Presence!**  
Advent 1 (27 November Anno Domini 2011)  
Rev. Steven D. Spencer  
Isaiah 64:1-9

***“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at the your presence - as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil - to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!”*** That’s a great prayer to kick off the season of Advent, isn’t it? Lord, tear open the heavens and come on down. We need You here, we need You now! Or as the collect prayer says for this first Advent Sunday, ***“Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come.”*** We need you more than ever down here, Lord, so come on down.

It would sure solve a lot of problems all at once, wouldn’t it? The economic crisis, the mortgage crisis, the energy crisis, the environmental crisis, the terrorism crisis - all of these things could be dealt with in one swift blow with the second coming of Jesus. What the nation’s leaders have been trying to fix in Washington for years could be fixed in a flash by the King of kings! Talk about a change of leadership! How about a quick change of the old, worn out and dying creation for the brand spanking new one?

But there’s one problem, sin. - Yours and mine. There’s the world’s sin too. The coming of the Lord is a coming to judge the living and the dead, to sort the sheep and the goats, to separate the sinner from the saint, and that line runs right down the middle of each one of us too. Be careful what you wish for. To look for the coming of the Lord is to look for the final death of our sinful humanity.

Isaiah says, ***“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous works are like a filthy garments.”*** The prophet is thinking of leprosy here, a contagious skin disease that caused everything you touched to be unclean. That’s an Old Testament picture of sin and its effects. It’s a type of leprosy. It isolates us. It gets between us. It renders us unclean. We’ve all become lepers, Isaiah says, and our righteous deeds, all our good works, are like a polluted garment. Whatever a leper touches, no matter how pure or precious that thing is, becomes unclean simply because a leper has touched it. Our works, the best of our good works, the highest and most noble works of charity and sacrifice for the neighbor, all have the greasy, leprous fingerprints of Father Adam on them. It’s inevitable and unavoidable.

That’s why works can’t save us. There is no such thing as a pure good work. Those good works of ours, worked by the Spirit of God, need to be put through a refining fire, the purifying fire of judgment (not purgatory - judgment!).

Isaiah says, ***“We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”*** “All we are is dust in the wind,” sang the rock band Kansas. (I date myself a bit here.) Like the fading leaves of autumn as the winter wind blows. We’re just blown away. That’s the wages of our sin. The aging process, the onset of illness, the breakdown of the body, the cancers and clogged arteries that plague us, the onset of Alzheimer and dementia, our bones turning brittle, our memories fading, our eyesight and hearing going down the tubes - it’s all the result of the entropy of sin. You can’t fight this, you can’t cure it, you can’t do anything about it, except this one thing. Trust in Jesus.

Isaiah says: ***“But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our Potter; we are all the work of your hand.”*** It’s one of the rare times that the Old Testament calls God “Father.” Here, it’s in the context of the clay and its potter, and the image is trust. The clay is entirely in the hands of the potter who shapes and molds it. It has nothing to say or do with how things come out and what will happen when the clay is put to the fire. The beauty of the creation is in the hand of the skilled craftsman, the potter, who knows how to bring out the beauty of the clay, to take a pile of mud and make something beautiful from it.

Only God can make something beautiful and worthwhile out of our messes - the mess of this world, the mess of our lives. Like a master potter with a lump of lifeless mud, God makes good out of the mess, and we are on the trusting, receiving, believing side of things. God saves us. He does it in the most remarkable and unpredictable of ways. The Potter becomes the clay. God becomes man. He takes on our humanity, born of woman, born under the Law.

In Jesus, God did rend the heavens and come down. In fact, when Jesus was baptized, the heavens were torn open, as Mark describes it, ripped like the curtain in the temple the moment Jesus died on the cross. Oh God rent the heavens and came down all right. He landed right smack in the middle of us as the Child of Bethlehem, the Carpenter of Nazareth, the Prophet from Galilee, the beggar King of Jerusalem riding on a donkey, the Man of Sorrows on the cross. He is you and me and all of leprous, sinful humanity - standing in our place, being the clay in His Father's hand. He is new humanity, humanity without the leprosy of sin, humanity restored to the image of God. He shares that with us, baptizing us, teaching us, granting us faith to follow Him.

We are entering the season of Advent. The word "advent" (adventus) means "coming" as when a king came to town. When we speak of Christ's advent we are really speaking of three things: His coming in humility; His coming in the hiddenness of Word and Sacrament; His coming in visible glory on the Last Day.

Advent looks back to His coming in humility. He rode into Jerusalem once on a borrowed donkey to shouts of "**Hosanna**" and "**Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.**" People welcomed Jesus as a king and hoped that He would be the one who would restore Israel. They waved palm branches and threw down their coats and were ready to take up stones and swords for the kingdom. But they learned something about this King and His kingdom. This King doesn't conquer with a sword but with a cross. And this kingdom is not about power in strength, but power in weakness. And this kingdom is not of this world but transcends this world and its kingdoms so that when all has passed away and is gone and there's nothing left, the kingdom of God remains forever.

This kingdom comes by way of death and resurrection. First the King dies and rises, then His subjects, and the whole creation do so as well. It all must die and rise as the King has died and risen. There is no kingdom quite like this one. Nor is there such a King the likes of Jesus.

He comes to us now in a hidden way. Advent looks to the present and Jesus' sacramental presence. Not seen though very real. He comes to us through the Word, through the water of Baptism, through the bread and wine of His Supper. He comes to us in this hidden way to save us here and now, where we are. He joins you to Himself in His death and life, making His death and life your death and life. He feeds you His Holy Body and Blood, His death and life becomes your food. He forgives you our sins by His Word. And trusting that Word, the kingdom comes to you and you are part of the kingdom.

He comes at the end in an observable, unattenuated glory. The heavens are once again opened, now to reveal the King in all His majesty. Advent looks forward. Christians have been looking forward since the very beginning with Jesus' promise - ***I am coming soon***. Suddenly soon - like a thief in the night, like a groom arriving for the wedding at midnight, like a flash of lightning. Two thousand years later for us no longer seems like "soon." The world laughs at the notion. We Christians must seem like Linus in the pumpkin patch waiting for the Great Pumpkin to arrive. St. Peter wrote that the scoffer would come and say, "***Where is this coming He promised?***" It's been business as usual since the beginning. Peter says, "***Don't forget the way God reckons time. A day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are as a day. The Lord isn't slow but merciful, patient, long-suffering, not wanting anyone to perish but for all to come to repentance***" (2 Peter 3:8-9).

The Day of the Lord will come soon, and suddenly. Be watchful. Be alert. Be ready for it, standing firm in the faith. Your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation. As He once entered Jerusalem on His way to the cross, so He will come to usher His Church to His city to share in His glory. Then you, robed in His righteousness, waving your palm branches of victory over sin and death which He gives you, will sing that eternal hymn of triumph:

***Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!*** Even so we prayer: Come Lord Jesus come quickly! Amen and amen.

*The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen*