

UNEXPECTED INVASIONS

Isaiah 64:1-9

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He looked me in the eye with deep intensity, as young adults tend to do, and then he said, "Do you believe in miracles?" "Indeed I do," I said with all the authority of my office and ordination. "Good," he replied. "I need an especially big one this week." With that he disappeared in the crowd and I never saw him again although I continue to pray for him often when his face comes into my mind's eye.

Here we are in December. December is not so much another month as it is another state of mind. In December we bring trees into our houses and light up our yards like living rooms. In December we shop till we drop and socialize until we are anesthetized with the busyness of the season. In December we sing of peace on earth good will to all and then continue to prepare for war. What if this December were different? Could you use a miracle this Advent season? How about an 'unexpected invasion' of a Divine kind, that leads to an unlikely restoration and an unusual joy. Ponder these impossible possibilities. These are the things I hope for you this Christmas.

The prophet Isaiah was looking for a miracle when he offered the prayer we find in Chapter 64. God, who once seemed powerful, now seemed impotent. The God who once was near was now nowhere to be found. So Isaiah does what all of us do in moments such as that. He prayed. I want to introduce you to this prayer today. This is what he said:

O that you would fall from the heaven 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 and from ages past no one has heard nor ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you who works for those who wait for him.

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL, AND RANSOM CAPTIVE ISRAEL. *Come make yourself known*, is the prayer of Isaiah (verses 1-4).

When our boys were little, they used to meet me at the door every night at supper time, where I would take them in my arms and toss them high into the air to their screams of delight and their mother's deep concern. We would repeat that ritual again and again until at last my arms would be tired and I would turn to them and say, "It's supper time now." Without exception they would always grab me around both ankles and say, "Would you do it again, Daddy, would you do it again just one more time? Would you do it again?"

It is this hunger that God would somehow “do it again” that is on the heart and mind of Isaiah. Isaiah had seen the mighty acts of the Lord. He knew about the waters parting at the Red Sea, and he knew about the smoke on the mountain at Sinai. He knew about manna in the wilderness, water from the rock, and the walls of Jericho that came tumbling down when the people of God marched around.

Now, it has been 60 years. He has been in exile and his place of worship is but a ruin and he cries out of the depths of his heart. “O God, would you do it again just one more time? Would you rip open the heavens and come down? Would you let the mountains tremble with volcanoes? Would you let the earthquakes break the Richter scale? Would you make yourself known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you? O God, become awesome again. Do it again, God, do it again.” That is his prayer.

Do you ever pray a prayer like that? Do you ever pray for God’s presence to powerfully become evident in our world once more? Mike Yaconnelli is the author of the book called Dangerous Wonder. In it he writes this: “Take surprise out of faith and all that is left is dry and dead religion. Take away mystery from the gospel and all that is left is a frozen and petrified dogma. Lose your awe of God and you are left with an impotent deity. Abandon astonishment and you are left with meaningless piety.”

Do you ever pray, “Lord, would you do it again?” I must confess to you I do. Some days I say, “O Dear Lord, why don’t you just one Sunday, let yourself be known? Why don’t you become more exciting than a football game, more interesting than golf, more spectacular than a getaway weekend? Would you make known your works among the people? Would you send a tingle up our spine and a wave of awe across the world? Would you shake us loose from politeness and once more let us encounter your power? Would you blow like the wind, burn like the fire, and touch us until we are inspired? Would you do it again God? Would you one time, just do it again?”

That is the hunger of Isaiah: make yourself known in our world. Then he begins to think about his prayer. He begins to think about the ramifications of it and it unnerves him. He is shaking and it suddenly becomes personal.

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL, COME MAKE IN US A HOME.

You meet those who gladly do right, who remember you in your ways. When 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 filthy rags. We all fade like a leaf and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away (verses 5-6).

Remember that old song which asked:

If Jesus came to your house to spend a day or two
If he came for just a visit, I wonder what you'd do?

It is that kind of longing that is happening to Isaiah right in the middle of his prayer. If God were to reveal himself and the works of God were to be known, it would be a shaky moment in my personal life. How can I be saved? Our righteousness is like a filthy rag. We are all shriveled up like a fallen leaf blown by the wind.

It was one of his favorite concepts, you know. In Isaiah 40 he says: *What is humanity except grass. We are like the grass of the morning, which in the morning flourishes and in the evening fades away.* What are we, he asks in this prayer, but a fallen leaf? O Lord, would you come make a home in this humble dwelling of mine? Isn't that what advent anticipation is all about? That the Lord would take up his abode in a place like this.

At a December dinner party, a minister was admiring an exquisite crèche lovingly displayed in the home of a hostess. The minister also observed the holy infant was missing from the hand carved figures. The hostess, noting the minister's interest, came over to comment. "The crèche was purchased in Austria at the Oberammergau Passion play." "However," said the hostess, "we lost baby Jesus many years ago and we just never bothered to replace him. We haven't missed him very much." God may not be very profound these days, but our need for him is deep.

Douglas Copeland, writer in this post-modern era, who coined the phrase Generation X, says in one of his books: I want to let you in on a secret. My secret is, I need God. I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I am no longer capable of giving. I need God to help me be kind, because I am no longer capable of kindness. I need God to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love on my own. Don't we all?

It took a miracle to put the world in place.
It took a miracle to fling the stars in space.
But when he saved my soul,
cleansed and made me whole,
It took a miracle of love and grace.

O God, would you take up a dwelling in this weary life of mine?

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL, MOLD US INTO ONE OF YOUR OWN (Verse 8). *Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter.* Yet, O Lord, you are our parent. I may be nothing more than a leaf falling off a tree in the fall and yet you are like a parent to me. Therein lies my hope.

Hope keeps faith from identifying the hiddenness of God as the absence of God.

Hope is an interior sense that there is help outside of us. I know we throw the word around a lot. ‘I hope so’ is really a wish tinged with a lot of doubt. Confidence and security are somehow absent. We sometimes say in the desperate moments of our lives, “All we can do is hope,” which is one of the most hopeless statements I’ve ever heard. Or we say in a kind of Pollyanna existence, “Well, cheer up, there’s always hope.” The hope of which we speak today is another level of hope. It is grounded in the understanding that the God of the universe is also the God who chooses to dwell in the innermost parts of my being. The God who is like a parent to me. *You are the potter, I am the clay.*

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL. WOULD YOU MOLD ME INTO ONE OF YOUR OWN?

A tea cup freshly purchased from a pottery store began to converse with its new owner. *There was a time when I was just clay and the master came and pounded me, squeezed me, kneaded me, so much that I screamed “Stop that!” but he just smiled and said, “Not yet, not yet.” Then he put me on a wheel. Started spinning me and he spun me so fast that I became so dizzy that I thought I’d never see my way again. “Please let me off this thing,” I said. And the master said, “Not yet, not yet.”*

Then he put me in an oven, shut the door, turned the heat up hotter and hotter until I began to scream at the top of my voice, “LET ME OUT OF HERE!” and he looked at me and smiled and said, “Not yet, not yet.”

He finally opened the door and I was out. I was relieved and thankful. Then he took a paint brush and began dabbing colors all over me and making swirls on the outside. When he had finished, he shoved me back in that oven again, only this time he turned up the heat twice as hot as before. I began to scream again “LET ME OUT OF HERE, LET ME OUT OF HERE!” He, with a tear in his eye, said “Not yet.”

When he finished he held me in his hands and gave me a mirror and said, “Now take a long look at what the master can do with a mound of clay.”

You see, the best thing that you and I can do today is to pray:

Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way.

Thou art the potter, I am the clay.

Mold me and make me after your will

While I am waiting, yielded and still.

Somebody said Christmas is make-believe. It is. God does the making. He asks us to do the believing. In those moments of your life when the hungry cries come from the innermost parts of your soul, don’t sell God short on what he might choose to do for you. For every time he makes himself known, it is a miracle, time after time after time. Amen.

