

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
²^[a] 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!
³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
⁴ 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.
⁵ 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.^[b]
⁶ 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.
⁷ 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^[c] us into the hand of our iniquity.
⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

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Holy Longing

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Isaiah 64:1–9

When I think of my Decembers in childhood, I remember the almost painful waiting. It began with the Sears Christmas Catalog where we circled the toys that we wanted. Then came decorating the tree and finally, boxes appeared with our names on them. We wanted so much to peek but knew that would spoil Christmas. We impatiently waited, hoping that something really big was about to happen.

Theologians call this the paradox of “already but not yet.” The kingdom of God is here and now, but it is also coming right around the corner. The world has already been transformed and redeemed, but it has not yet become all that it can be and will be. Christ has come; Christ will come again.

American stores burst with Christmas paraphernalia. Lowe’s has dozens of blow up Santas and Snowmen. At Home offers rows of glitter, nutcrackers, reindeer. Just at this feverish moment, the church puts on the brakes, slows down and becomes pensive. We start singing all those Advent hymns in a minor key.

Waiting and slowing down is an important Biblical theme.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence,
to make your name known to your adversaries.”

That prayer is 2,500 years old. It’s from the sixty-fourth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah and we hear it from the Lectionary every 3 years.

The word *Advent* is from the Latin *adventus* — literally meaning “coming” — and refers to this idea, of the Son of Man returning. It is the kingdom of the mustard seed barely seen and yet growing into a towering tree. It is the kingdom of the yeast: almost invisible and yet able to bring about great change. God’s promises may not have come fully into being yet, but even as things look darker and darker around us as we wait for Christ to

arrive again in the world. In Advent, we learn how to live in this waiting time between the manger and Jesus' return.

There is a short story written by the Jesuit priest Anthony De Mello that helps us to understand what our Advent waiting might look like. Many, many years ago, he writes, there was a monastery known for their spiritual wisdom. It was situated high on a hill in the quiet of the countryside. The monastery was a small and humble building. But despite its humble appearance, it was a global destination. Travelers would come from thousands of miles away to be with the monks—to sit, to pray, and to listen to them as they gathered together in community.

However, as time passed on, fewer and fewer travelers came to the monastery. As the steady stream of travelers slowed to a trickle, the serene environment began to fracture. Everyone had theories as to why this monastery was losing so many visitors: it was changing attitudes in the wider culture, a lack of time for spiritual things, and a general indifference. The monks even began to point fingers at one another for why there were so few visitors. Brother Lawrence had woken up several guests with his snoring. Brother John's prayers and meditations had been particularly boring in recent months. Perhaps they needed to find a leader with more charisma? Brother Henry's cooking was too bland, making the same potato-and-carrot soup every night. Perhaps the routine of their shared meals was the problem? The monks continued to point fingers at each other. They thought that if only the other monks would follow their own ideas, they could return to their former glory. And meanwhile, the stream of visitors continued to slow until one week when they did not receive any visitors at all.

A few weeks later, the monks were surprised to receive a letter from the head of their order: he had heard about how few visitors the monastery was receiving and wanted to come and see what was going on firsthand. The monks were distraught and began blaming each other even more. "Look at what you've done," they shouted at one another. "He will see how much we've fallen, and we will be shut down!" But as preparations to receive the head of the order fell into place, each monk became secretly pleased that the head would see what was going on and could set the others straight.

When the head of the order arrived a few weeks later, the monks began on their best behavior. They were courteous and made sure he was comfortable. It all seemed to be going smoothly on that first day, but, alas, this peace could not last. The next morning, after a bland meal and an even blander prayer, one of the monks couldn't help but exclaim, "Do you see why we are struggling? Please correct my brothers so that we might return to our former glory." And the rest of the room erupted, each monk

making excuses and blamed the others. The head of their order calmly looked around the room and observed the anger and frustration on each face. And after a few minutes, he stood up and left without a word, leaving the monks and the monastery to head home.

After this, the monks were resigned to the downfall of their beloved monastery. Faces were glum, the vibrancy completely gone. When they received a letter from the order the following week, no one wanted to open it, certain that it would contain bad news. To their surprise, though, the letter contained nothing of the sort. "Thank you, brothers, for your hospitality," the head had written. "I had heard tales that your monastery had grown sour and uninviting and came expecting it to be so. Can you imagine my surprise to discover that within your very walls, I came to find out that one of you was the risen Christ, quietly returned to earth but hidden from plain sight." The monks put down the letter with a stunned silence—one of them, the returned Christ? No one seemed to fit the criteria, but they knew too that Christ often went in the stranger's guise. Humbled and embarrassed, they each quietly swore to themselves that they would change their ways so as not to accidentally offend Christ.

That night, as Brother Lawrence's snores echoed down the hallway, none of the other monks could bring themselves to wake him up; after all, what if Brother Lawrence was Christ in disguise? During prayers, they listened carefully to the dull words of Brother John, for what if he was the Christ? Rather than grumbling over their potato-and-carrot soup, the monks thanked Brother Henry for his work, for what if Brother Henry was Christ?

The months passed by like this, and without anyone even realizing it the monastery slowly began to fill once again with visitors. Each person who entered was given strict instructions to treat the other guests with love and respect, for even after several months they still had not figured out who among them was the Christ. And by the end of the year, the monastery's reputation had been restored, and once again people came from miles away to pray and to listen.

In these Advent days of waiting, we watch and wait for a birth of a child in Bethlehem, a newborn who is God among us. And here's the thing: this love will come into your life and mine in quiet, inconspicuous ways, ways you could miss if you are not waiting and watching; ways that are redemptive and hopeful and strong. You will wonder if Christ's spirit can be found in a neighbor, a teacher or a friend. Jesus will teach and live out the most astonishing and new and radical ideas: that the peacemakers are blessed, that the meek and merciful are God's most favored ones, and finally that the best,

happiest thing any one of us can do is give our lives away for his sake: a love that is God's response to our deepest longing: Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.
Amen.