

A couple weeks ago in the middle of the night I was awakened from a deep sleep by both my daughters' screaming in the next room. My girls are almost four and two years old. As I'm stumbling out of bed and racing toward their room I'm imagining what I might find there – maybe Annie figured out how to climb out of her crib and got hurt, maybe it's some kind of scary bug (they hate spiders), maybe the ceiling sprung a leak and is dripping cold water on them, I don't know.

When I get there I quickly run down the parent checklist – no blood, no broken bones, everything looks to be in its place. The oldest communicates better, so I start with her. What's wrong, Emma? "Annie's crying and I told her to stop but she's not listening to my words!" Seriously?! Her crying is making you cry back at her? Ok, you're gonna be fine, let me see why she's upset. What's wrong, Anne? Through her sobs she says, "I...want...cover...up!" That's it? You two are screaming at the top of your lungs at 2am over a slightly misplaced blanket? Awesome, thanks for the near heart attack. Here's your blanket, go to bed!

As I thought about that incident later though, I realized the girls were upset about something more than just a blanket. Each of them was upset because they weren't being heard. Anne wanted her blanket and no one was helping her, so she cried until someone responded. Unfortunately for her, the first responder was her not-so-sympathetic older sister who told her to be quiet. Which made Anne cry louder. Which made Emma cry because she wasn't being heard either – "Annie's not listening to my words!" It's human nature to want to be heard when we're upset. And when we're not heard, things escalate – usually for the worse. When we cry out we want someone to hear us and help.

Today is the first Sunday of the Advent season. Advent is the time just before Christmas when we look forward to celebrating Christ's birth. But before we can celebrate, we wait. And we prepare our hearts. Advent is a season of longing, a season of anticipation. We long to celebrate Christ's coming as a newborn baby. But we also long for him to come again in glory and make all things new. And so Advent is a season set in a minor key. We sing O Come O Come Immanuel, a song of longing and lament, a song of mourning while in exile. It's a song of crying out to God. And a song of God hearing and coming near.

After witnessing all that went down in Ferguson and Cleveland this week many of us cry out with the psalmists, How long, O Lord? How long will our world be this way? How long will you be silent and stand by as destruction and fear and pain and suffering are all around us? That's what the season of Advent is all about – crying out that God would come near again, even now, and bring light to darkness, order to chaos, peace to unrest.

Today we begin our Advent series entitled "Heaven Comes Down." The title comes from the first verse of our scripture today. Hear this word from the prophet Isaiah, a desperate cry to the God who hears our cries and comes near in Christ.

Reading: Isaiah 64:1-9

1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— 2 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. 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 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.

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God!**

I want to start with a little context for the situation in which Isaiah is writing. Israel was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was in ruins. Most of the Jews left in Jerusalem were carted off into captivity in Babylon. These are God's people – completely and utterly homeless – with no more claim to God's promised land and no more temple in which to worship. They find themselves living in exile, aliens in a strange land of foreign gods. And they're suddenly wondering if the God who'd promised over and over never to leave them had forgotten those promises. Conquered and living in a foreign country, they look around and wonder how did this happen to us? Aren't we God's chosen people? What went wrong?

So they do the only thing they know to do – call upon God to intervene. After all, God had a history of taking action when things got really bad. They had seen God act decisively before in response to the cries of his people.

When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt several hundred years before, God said to Moses, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; **I have heard their cry...** Indeed, I know their sufferings, 8 and **I have come down to deliver them.**"

When God's people were slaves in Egypt, God heard their cries and came down to deliver them. That's who God is – God hears, and God responds. Isaiah's contemporaries thought maybe, just maybe, God would do it again. Never mind that they'd rebelled against God, forgotten God's law, and neglected to hold up their end of the covenant. Isaiah reminded them of their disobedience, and they repented and recalled God's faithfulness in hopes that God would save them once again. They were desperate for God to intervene on their behalf. And they cried out.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! Come down and shake the mountains and make your name known to your adversaries! Do something, God! Interesting that Isaiah says so your adversaries may know, because in the previous chapter he says the Israelites themselves had become God's enemy (63:10) and have long been like those not called by God's name (63:19). So when he says make your name known to your adversaries, he's really appealing to God to make himself known among God's own people again, too. Have you ever prayed like that? That God would make himself known to you in earth shattering ways? Careful, that's a dangerous prayer! But a biblical one.

Isaiah goes on in chapter 46 verses 6 and 7 to describe what happens when we don't listen to God's voice and God's word. He says that we're shaped and formed by our own desires, blown away like a faded leaf in the wind of our sin. Sin makes it that much harder to hear God's voice. But there's hope.

Verse 8 says even in the midst of our sinfulness and rebellion, you are our Father, God. We still belong to you. Even though we're formed by our own choices and impacted by sin, God you made us, and you can remake us. We've shaped ourselves but you can reshape us. You formed us in our mother's womb, and you continually reform us into the people you made us to be. We are all the work of your hand. We are all made in your image, God. Verse 9 ends by reminding God – Now consider, we are all your people. Isaiah is calling on God to remember his covenant. Remember your steadfast love, O God. Being covenant people means we're bound to God by a love that always pursues us. An unending love that never gives up. We're bound by that kind of love first to God, then to each other as God's people.

What does it mean to remember these things this week in the wake of Ferguson? When our TVs and facebook feeds are bombarded with images of destruction, hatred, and violence. What does it mean to remember that all those people, every single one – from Michael Brown to Darren Wilson to every last protestor (peaceful and otherwise) – all those people are the work of God's hand? In Cleveland, as parents of 12 year old Tamir Rice grieve the death of their son, what does it mean that we're bound to them as they grieve? What does it mean to live as God's people in a world where sin is so prevalent, where people are displaced and forced into exile even today, where families are destroyed by violence and abuse, where people are violated, persecuted, and even killed for their religious beliefs? All of these things make us cry out with Isaiah, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" God, do something today!

We can't force God's hand, and we can't make Jesus come back even one minute sooner, as much as we'd like to. But being God's people, made in God's image, bound by God's covenant love, we can and must respond in ways consistent with God's character. Being God's people means we must listen.

Listening starts with listening to God and obeying God's word. But it also means listening to God's people. We're all in this covenant together, and being part of God's family means we take the good along with the bad. The rejoicing along with the weeping. Given this holiday weekend, I'm sure some of your family visits included both laughter and tears. You might have even had to spend some time with people you don't always agree with or even particularly like very much! I won't ask you to raise your hand if you did that. But that's what real families are about. And it's the same with God's family. We're called to listen even when we don't agree, and to love even when we don't necessarily like each other. In the same way, we can't get to the joy of Christmas without first going through the longing of Advent. We can't get to the glory of the resurrection without first going through the suffering of the cross. As Christians we're called to both.

So what does it look like to be Advent people? What does it look like to wait for God to tear open the heavens and come down? What does it mean that we worship a God who hears the cries of his people? It means that we must be willing to hear those cries, too, and respond with our presence.

I'm so excited that we commissioned new Stephen Ministers today. These folks are our most excellent listeners. It's one of the first things we teach them in training. People need to be heard. Especially people who are hurting. Cheryl Keller has a sign that reads, "What people really need is a good listening to." And I think that's right. When my daughter was crying in her bed, the longer she went unanswered the louder she cried. The more distressed she became. She just needed someone who would listen. Whether we externalize our grief and frustration like my daughter or not, we all need someone to listen to us when we're hurting. If you're hurting, please come talk to me or one of our Stephen Leaders.

One of the most difficult things to learn about listening is that it doesn't require you to say much at all. That might seem intuitive but in practice it's really hard. In crisis situations we often get nervous and wonder what to say next. It's hard to trust that the Holy Spirit is there with us, interceding with sighs too deep for words. Sometimes complete silence makes for the best kind of listening.

Henri Nouwen puts it this way, "The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares."

I wonder if listening isn't a first step forward in Ferguson, too? Regardless of your opinion on Ferguson, one thing is clear – no one feels listened to. Not the law enforcement community, not Michael Brown's family, not the African American community in general. What is it that happened there that made millions of people so upset? Obviously Michael Brown's death is tragic, but that one event in and of itself doesn't seem to be enough to cause that kind of stirring, emotional, guttural response of lament and outrage. Not to mention the riots and destruction that followed. There's something bigger going on here. There's more to the story.

Martin Luther King once said, "Riot is the language of the unheard." He didn't say this to condone rioting. He was actually rebuking a violent response to injustice. But he was describing that the conditions that lead to riots are those in which peoples' cries have long gone unanswered. And peoples' voices have too long been ignored.

Ferguson is more than just what happened to Michael Brown. It's more than an isolated incident, it's about a larger system of injustice. It's a part of an ongoing story of a group of Americans whose stories have long gone unheard. And if that makes you bristle a little bit, I especially encourage you to listen. Listen to the stories of people of color and how they describe their feelings about Ferguson. Listen to their stories about their own experiences living in America as a non-white person. And listen to the stories of our law enforcement community – God bless them especially now as they try to serve and protect in an environment of increasing tension and distrust.

As Christians, we are called to listen. If your soul has been stirred by this week's events and you're looking for a way to respond, Blackburn's Chapel will be hosting a Prayer Vigil today at 4:30. I encourage you to come, offer your presence, and pray in silence.

But maybe Ferguson is too far away from Boone for us to really connect and resonate. So then we have to ask the question whose voices regularly go unheard here in our town? Who is it that cries out in our community but feels like no one is listening? Those who can barely afford to live here? Folks struggling to heat their homes this winter? Migrant farm workers? Single people? Single parents? Lonely and depressed college students who feel their only option is to end their lives? People stuck in abusive relationships who don't know where to turn? Overwhelmed and exhausted and caregivers who just need a little break? Those can no longer drive here to worship with us? Military families who can't stand to watch the news anymore, or whose hearts jump every time the doorbell rings? Elderly people whose families have warehoused them in a nursing home but never visit?

As God's people in Boone, who do we need to listen to? Whose voices aren't being heard in our midst? Who do we need to stand with in solidarity, recognizing their inherent dignity as people made in the image of God? Who is crying desperately for God to intervene, to break open the heavens and come

down? Who do you know who just needs someone to listen and let them know their cries are being heard?

Last week Luke Edwards and I went to a crisis and disaster training event for clergy led by Rabbi Stephen Roberts. He's the rabbi at Temple of the High Country here in Boone. When 9/11 happened he was living in New York just a quarter mile from ground zero, and he became in charge of the entire clergy response team, some 800 chaplains. He told us that in all his years as a professional chaplain, he's learned that the best thing we can do to support someone in crisis is to show up. Because when we show up, it's like God is showing up to that hurting person. Let me say that again – when we show up, it's as if God showed up to that person. Our presence reassures them someone is hearing their cries. Someone is listening after all.

That's what Stephen Ministers do. They show up, and they listen. That's what all God's people are created to do. Since we're made in the image of a God who hears the cries of his people and comes near, we're created to do the same.

[CR: Invite worship team back up]

Isaiah 64 ends with verses 10-12 talking about God's holy cities becoming a wilderness, there's desolation everywhere, the temple of God destroyed, places where our ancestors praised God have been burned by fire, pleasant places have become ruins. Verse 12 says After all this – after all this injustice, all this desecration of your holy people and holy places – will you keep silent, O Lord? That's how the chapter ends – it just stops right there, with an open-ended, haunting yet hopeful question to the God of all mercy and justice. Will you keep silent, O Lord?

What a great Advent question for us to chew on today. Especially for those of us who are desperate for God to intervene in our lives in earth shaking ways. As Advent people, it's ok for us to linger on that question, especially when we look around and wonder where God is in the midst of all the suffering around us. But as readers of the gospel, we also know God answered that question most definitively. When Isaiah says will you keep silent Lord, God answers with a resounding No! God did not keep silent in the face of evil and sin. Rather, God tore open the heavens and came down, all the way down, to a manger, to bring heaven to earth as a baby boy. To bring light and life to all. Through Christ God took on all human suffering in order to bring an end to it forever. God answered and embodied every last human cry in order that one day there would be no more crying or tears. And one day he'll return to make all things new.

How long, O Lord, before Jesus comes back? Now that's a tougher question, one that no one can answer. But in the meantime we can have confidence that when we cry out, God hears us. As God's people we can continue to show up and listen to those who are hurting. And we can continue to hope as we sing the advent hymn – Rejoice, rejoice! Immanuel *shall* come to you O Israel, and to all God's people on earth. God of heaven, come down, and come quickly. Amen.