

November 30, 2014, BBC, 1st Advent & new series

Jason Byassee Blackburn's Chapel UMC

I'm delighted to be with you this morning. From my very first Sunday on this job when I joined y'all for worship until today, every single time I come to Todd I wonder why I'm not out here more often. Thank you for the gift of beginning Advent with you. In my responsibility as senior pastor at Boone I'm grateful for what Blackburn gives us. We never have a staff meeting where we're not thinking about y'all—Brandon gently makes sure of that. And what y'all show us is that Christianity is intimate, face to face. Our danger in Boone is that the church can feel big, impersonal. Someone could vanish and no one would notice, you can be present and no one would seem to care. Here we all notice, we all care. That makes life in a small church blessedly difficult. If there's a conflict no one can escape it. *And* that's a gift. We can't hide things here. We have to face them together. That's how we become holy, and like Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah tells a truth that isn't pleasant. It's no accident that prophets often end up dead too young. We get tired of hearing from them. Here's why Isaiah could be bracing for us this morning: it's the holiday season out there. A season of enforced pleasantness with muzak that starts nearly in September, and movies that always end happily, and semi-enforced gluttony. It's no wonder why those who are depressed feel more depressed this time of year. The whole rest of the world seems happy. And it's never clear what any of this has to do with the child in Bethlehem.

What Advent teaches us is that Christmas . . . can wait. And this suits our lives. So many of us don't want enforced cheer in the stores or in church or among us. Because we don't feel cheer in our lives. We feel sad. Alone. Desolate. We feel like we pray but God's not listening, or God isn't responding. This is why the church in her wisdom asks us to hold off on Christmas until, well, Christmas. Advent makes space for sadness, for hymns in a minor key, for things in blue. This holding off often causes a tug o war between us pastors and you parishioners. We say no Christmas hymns till Christmas and y'all say 'our lives are dark enough, give us some light, some carols.' We both say true things. Advent tells us to hold off. While the world is overly festive out there, in here we are underly festive. Because God waits to appear. God hides, until God's own good time. The word advent means "coming." In Advent, we put ourselves in the position of Israel waiting for a messiah. Because the church now *is* Israel waiting for a

messiah—Christ’s coming in glory that will make all things right forever. Hear this word from Isaiah from a devastated Israel wondering where on earth God is, and demanding that God come quickly. Listen to the book you love.

Isaiah 64

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 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 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 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 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. Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?

This is the word of God, it belongs to us, the people of God, thanks be to God.

I hope you caught the devastation in that reading from Isaiah. God’s house is ruined, a smoldering rubble, gone. This isn’t just like a church burned down—like Foscoe Christian Church, trying to rebuild now, like Boone Methodist in 1982. Burnt things can be rebuilt. In Isaiah, Jerusalem is a waste, *no* intention to rebuild, wild animals living there. When I was in Israel recently we laughed to see that the gate by the temple mount, the holiest place in Judaism, is called the dung gate. For centuries it was a trash dump—hence the name. To have no temple means God has no house and there is no way to worship. Trash, dung, utter loss.

And I'm struck by how deeply that matches some of our lives. Maybe it's because of my line of work but nobody comes to me and says 'my life is entirely too perfect.' Maybe there are such people and they just don't need the church. What I hear from you more often is a version of this question, where is God? I pray and nothing happens. My heart is a wasteland. Everyone around me seems fine. Whatever else *I* am, I am *not* fine. This text from Isaiah shows you are not alone.

Did you know that the bible itself asks why God is so absent?

I feel that in my life. I pray and nothing happens. I tell y'all stories of God's great deeds in the past and then look around for new great deeds and . . . nothing. I feel that in our world. We're seeing images in our media of things happening here in this country that look like some other country. Minorities are right to say they shouldn't be singled out for violence or worry their kids will be shot just for being black or brown. Cops are right to say they're defending all of us and shouldn't have to worry we'll turn on them for doing that. Both seem right and both seem wrong. Which is it God? And God doesn't answer. We'll ask that question together again today at 4:30 in our prayer vigil here. Our church is torn apart denominationally by fighting over homosexuality. One side says we have to include those most different from us. They're right, they have to be right. Another side says we have to be faithful to the bible. They're right, we have to be faithful to the bible. So which do we do God? And God seems silent. Those are headline sorts of issues. But what I see in your lives is more frightening still. Questions like these: why can't my kid get off drugs? Where did the jobs go and will they ever come back? How do I get ahead at work when I keep trying harder and it doesn't seem to matter. Why doesn't the phone ring?

Isaiah prays this way. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." The bible prays that God will act because God . . . is not acting now. Isaiah goes on. Remember the good ole days? When God was at our table and our wishes came true? Remember when our country was happy and at peace? Remember when everything was fine in our family? Remember when we had God's cell phone number and God answered on the first ring? Remember all that? Nostalgia is dangerous. The good ole days never were that good. To give one example—white people often say how great the 50s were. Black people usually do not. In the 50s they couldn't vote, buy a house where they wanted, or go to the

best schools. The problem is when we bring up the good ole days we're usually picking up a club to beat up someone else or ourselves. Isaiah *in the bible* says uh, God, turn up please, we're waiting. *These* good ole days *in the bible* are full of confusion and sorrow. So, God, you're late, again, and we're waiting, afraid and alone.

This is one of the things that impresses me most about God. The bible is utterly realistic. 15 minutes after Adam and Eve are in the garden they're breaking the rules. 10 minutes after Cain and Abel are left alone the second brother ever born murders the first. 5 minutes after the Israelites see God split the Red Sea they're whining in the wilderness and begging to go back to Egypt. And the vast majority of the people who saw Jesus ignored him, or cheered at the crucifixion. Things have never been easy. No wonder they're not now.

Advent is about longing. It's about *our* longing for God to come among us and make things right. It's also about *God's* longing. God's desire to be with us and for his beautiful world to be right again. It's why the hymns have longing in them and come in minor keys. "O Come O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lowly exile here." One of the things that hurts most in the holidays for depressed people is that everyone else seems happy. Advent says that we *shouldn't* all seem happy. All is not right in our hearts, our world, our church, or in God's heart. In Advent we long for the world God wants.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." Isaiah is remembering Exodus, when the mountains shook and so did people's hearts. Isaiah wants God's earth-shattering heaven-shredding presence back. We tell stories in here all the time of when God acted. And we wonder why God isn't acting that way now. Advent says God will. You'll see.

A preacher I admire tells of a Christmas card she got one year. The cover had a bright beautiful image with the words, "God visits us like the dawn." Cheerful, like we're supposed to be at Christmas. Then the inside had a hungry child in rags in a slum and said, "to give light to those in darkness." Some were outraged. 'Christmas is for cheerful things.' But this is perfectly biblical. God doesn't look away from the darkness. God enters it. Advent then is a time for God's wrath (I sound like a Baptist preacher here this morning don't I?). The world is not as God

wants. God is angry about it. We have made a hash of God's world. And God can't stand it. Won't stand it.

Advent says ok God, you don't like it, come and fix it. Now.

Notice how different this is than what *we* do with something wrong. My personality is that when something is wrong I hustle to fix it. Politically when something is wrong we blame some bad guy. Friend of mine anytime anything goes wrong they blame Obama. (he's joking) Burnt the pot roast? Obama's fault. No parking place? Obama's fault. Just like liberals have been blaming George W Bush for the weather for 20 years. Christians do something different. When we blame we look right in the mirror. Whose fault is it? Mine. That's the bible's answer.

I heard recently of a woman popping off to her plumber about religious people. Don't they know their church is full of hypocrites? The plumber answered, "well ma'am, where else do you want us?" Anytime we see another human being we are seeing someone else who betrayed Christ with us. And the way to relate to other people is to say ok, she and I are both betrayers of Jesus. And the One we betray, has forgiven us both. What do we do now?

Christians call this teaching "original sin." It says that no matter what we do there is in it a hint of Adam, a touch of Eve. Sometimes Christians are criticized for this teaching. That we're pessimistic, gloomy, morose. Actually original sin is cheerful. Because it's so realistic. And it's about our only doctrine that we can prove. Just try leaving kids alone for any length of time with one rule and see how quickly they break it. Isaiah doesn't mince words: "all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth." Everything we think we do well is like something disgusting, some translations suggest menstrual cloths, others suggest beggars' rags. Let me give an example of this.

I was in Israel recently for the first time in 20 years. 20 years ago I was impressed with how mistreated Palestinians are. They have lived there for thousands of years and in 1948 or 1967 or last year were moved off their land so Israel could have a homeland. Sure, the holocaust was terrible, but the Palestinians didn't do it, and didn't deserve to lose land and fields and hope. This most recent time a few months ago I felt more sympathetic with the Israelis. Maybe because on our first day there was a terror attack that killed a baby. On the day we left there was an assassination attempt. A few weeks later another assassination killed 4 rabbis. If you're Israeli

this is how the world always is and another holocaust could be just around the corner. And I left more sympathetic with them this time. Here's the reality. Both groups are sinners. Murderers claiming to be victims. And so are we all. The world is full of similar examples—India and Pakistan, Russia and Ukraine, each of our families, and each of our hearts. That's original sin. Nobody can blame anybody else and claim to be innocent; all of us are at fault. Lord tear the heavens open and come down.

A strange detail in this text. It subtly blames God. "*Because* you hid yourself we transgressed"—*because* we can't see God we sin. This is sort of daring of Isaiah. God, because you weren't around we sinned, it's your fault God. I wouldn't pray such a way, nor would I encourage you to, but the bible does. Think of it this way. When I visit with church folks they're generally well-behaved. Preacher's here, everyone act right. This isn't because of me personally, it's my office—I remind people of God's presence despite my personal inadequacies. It's an honor. A sillier example this time—a friend of mine drives a life-sized Santa Claus around town this time of year and notices he drives better when he does it. Silly, right? This isn't though. I think of couples who in my presence are polite, courteous. As soon as I'm gone, the long list of resentments starts getting longer. 'You did this. Well you did this. Well you're a failure. You're a loser.' And all are miserable. How do we get that way where the person most important in our lives makes us most miserable? Well, if God were more visible more of the time maybe we'd improve, our memory would get shorter and our love longer. Maybe we could all pray this way, Lord let us act like you're always here because you are! Say it with me, Lord let us act like you're always here because you are.

Isaiah says God hides himself. "You have hidden your face from us." *God* decides when to turn up. God is not a genie in a bottle, subject to our whims, God appears when God wants. This is what makes him God and us creatures, God is in charge and we are not. Some say if God feels absent it's because we did something wrong, we're not spiritual enough, or whatever. You've seen the quote on church signs—if God seems far, who moved? Isaiah says instead that *God* hides himself. And let me remind you when God hid himself most: on the very first Christmas. Folks expected a God to their liking. A superhero, someone to save the day and kill their enemies. And what they got was a child. Instead of the God we want, we get the God we need.

We Christians know how Isaiah's prayer turns out. God *did* tear the heavens apart and come down. Just not the way people expected. God came as a child. And then as a crucified man. We too wait for God to act. We beg God to tear the heavens apart and come down. Advent is a time of waiting with baited breath. One poet it calls Advent the ultimate "time being." God *has* come. God *will* come again. In the meantime we wait, expectantly.

Two words of instruction while we wait. One, Isaiah calls us *clay*. Two, he calls us *children*. First, clay. "We are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." More of you throw pots than I can remember. You know how to work with clay. You mold it, work it, moisten it, tear it apart if it fails, reuse it, you fire it, make it beautiful. What's it mean to *be* that clay? To be worked by the hands of a creator who's strong, wise, and wants us beautiful? Two, children: "O Lord, you are our Father," Isaiah says. The Old Testament calls God "Father" just 10 or 12 times. Jesus calls God Father *hundreds* of times. And he teaches us to do the same. "Our Father . . .". This is a Father who *disciplines* us children. Jesus is disciplined with his cross. Our discipline is our cross in our lives. Our neighbors and enemies have their crosses too. And the goal is to be the children God wants.

So this waiting in Advent isn't empty. It's busy. God's hands molding and working us. God's parenting is training us. All of it together making us the people God wants.

In Advent we say this, "come Lord Jesus." Say that with me, "come Lord Jesus." And come soon. Amen.