

We're in a series called All I Want for Christmas. This morning we're going to explore, "All I want for Christmas is for God to show up." As a child, it was easy to think about what I wanted for Christmas. Maybe you did what I did and created a Christmas list. We had our Hot Wheels car, bike, or different things like that. But as an adult, it's a lot harder to fill in the blank, "All I Want for Christmas is..." Not because it's harder to shop for an adult than a child (though it is). Nor is it because we have everything we want. But I think it's harder as an adult to answer what we want for Christmas because what we want is more complicated than toys and bikes.

Maybe there are burdens that you have carried for months, and all you want for Christmas is for that burden to be released. Maybe there is a relationship that is torn despite your best efforts to heal, and if you had any wish, it would be for that relationship to be restored. Maybe there's uncertainty about the future that you desperately long to resolve. "All I want for Christmas is..." gets a lot more complicated as adults.

At the heart of it is this idea is that we're longing for God to show up. We're longing for God to show up amid our stories. And what I want to do is take us through a passage in the prophet Isaiah 64. We're going to cover it in three movements: longing, confession, and permanence. My hope today through these three movements is that you would have space before we get to Christmas to consider the past year.

Longing

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you. Isaiah 64:1-4

The first movement is longing. Isaiah gives voice to the longing that we all feel. He starts with the desire for God to render the heavens, which is an ancient word that means "to rip apart." Heaven, to be clear, isn't talked about as the farthest star element of the universe that we haven't discovered. Rather, heaven is the realm in which God operates, and earth is here in the realm in which we dwell. When the biblical writers talk about these two realms, they talk about them interacting and colliding. Isaiah exclaims that it feels like the interaction is not happening. It feels like there's a distance between God and us. It feels like there's a barrier. It's as if he says, "God, I wish that you would rip down that barrier. I wish

that heaven and earth would come together." You don't have to get very far in the prophet's words until you get a sense of longing.

We feel this longing at different stages in our life. God can feel distant. A modern-day writer uses a phrase I find fascinating. He calls it "the absence of God." Not that God is absent; I don't believe that he is absent. Rather, there are seasons during which it feels like we're alone in the world.

Then, in verses three and four, Isaiah refers back to a pivotal moment in the history of Israel: the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It was an incredibly dramatic event, including fire, darkness, and an earthquake. Everyone at Sinai realized God broke down the barrier between heaven and earth and revealed himself to people. What Isaiah is exclaiming is, "We want that again. God do that type of thing again. Reveal yourself again."

Maybe you've had moments like that in your life. Perhaps you've had moments in 2019 in which you longed for a renewed sense of God. Maybe you feel like there's a barrier between you and God, and you can relate to the prophet who longs for God to rip down that barrier. Before we move into Christmas and what it means for God to come to us. We have to sit with longing. I love that the prophet doesn't resolve the longing. He will. But not yet. At times, we push beyond longing when maybe we need to sit with it. Maybe 2019 has brought disappointment to you. Perhaps it's brought confusion. Maybe there's a deep longing in your heart, and it's easy just to run past it with everything going on. I want to give you space to sit with your longing. To be honest with God, to ask Him, are you willing to act again?

Confession

You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins. vv. 5-7

First longing. Now, a confession. As we move through that period of longing, something else begins to happen. We take a deeper look at ourselves. Something has been deeply wrong about humanity since almost the beginning.

"Ancient times" (verse four) and "continuing" (verse five) are the same words in the original language. In other words, what's been constant

since the very beginning has been both God's purposes and humanity's rejection of it. Something needs to change in us. Something needs to be made new in us. As a result, God is hidden from us. Mark shared last week about the garden of Eden and one of the most critical questions in the history of humanity. God comes to Adam and Eve after they've turned from him and done their own thing, and God said, "Where are you?" It's not a question to fill God's knowledge. It was a question to call out their willingness to be seen by God. Amid their sin, they were unwilling to be seen by God.

I wonder if confession could be the admission that we're hiding. We did that as children. When you had those wonderful Christmas presents, and then two hours later you got angry at your brother because he got the train and you didn't, and you hit him. What did you do? You hid. Maybe physically hid or lied to hide your responsibility. We do everything we can to hide from God. The question that he asked Adam and Eve - "Where are you?" - He still asks of you and me today. Are you willing to be found by God?

The danger is that we can get to the end of this year, battle through our longing and disappointment, face the darkness that's in us, but somehow believe God doesn't want anything to do with us. Christmas declares the opposites. Christmas declares that God has done everything to come to you. Maybe confession for you is asking yourself this question, "Am I willing to be found by God?"

Permanence

Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people. vv. 8-9

Longing, confession, and the last movement in the passage is permanence. This is the permanence of God's character and relationship with us. I love the imagery. He talks about three types of relationships: a father and a child, a potter and clay, and a skilled worker, and a piece of art. His point is the permanence of the relationships. If you had to sum up Christmas, you could do it with those two words: "Yet You..." We've been longing for God, and we've seen the depths of what's wrong with our humanity. And in one movement we see Christmas. "Yet You..."

Everything we've done is filthy and unclean. We're unwilling times to be seen by Him. And yet God has come to us even when we were distant. Even in the midst of our disappointment, even amid our waiting, God came. "Yet You..." There's permanence in His view of us. It's like the love of a father and a child, like the purpose of a potter and a piece of clay, or like the skill of a craftsman and a work of art. There's something that

God is intentionally working in you so that during your story, whatever your story was in 2019, your story can end with these two words: "Yet You..."

In John 1:16-17, there's a fascinating statement where John describes what it means that Jesus has come to earth at Christmas. John says that God has given you grace, and if you feel like you've gotten to a point where that grace has run out, that you've wasted grace, that you've used grace, here's the good news. God gave you even more grace. When you feel like you're at the end of grace, there's even more grace. God doesn't stop giving grace to you. He gives grace in place of grace. This is what Christmas is brought about. His grace on top of grace, on top of grace for you.

And then, in verse 17, John references the Law given to Moses. We heard about it earlier in the Isaiah passage. God revealed himself when he'd ripped open the heavens on Mount Sinai. And what John says is that as amazing as that event is, as much as Isaiah would love to see that happen again, John says something better is here. Something better has happened in the person of Jesus. Something better has happened at Christmas.

Whatever your story was in 2019, let these three words, longing, confession, permanence, guide you as you move forward — first, longing. Maybe 2019 has been a time where you've just felt the absence of God. Again, we don't mean literally - I don't believe he's absent - but it's felt like that may be for you at times. Maybe longing has derailed you as you come to Christmas. My hope for you today is that you would hear that there is a grace of top of grace for you.

Second, confession. Maybe 2019 has meant a season of hiding from you, hiding from God. Are you willing to be seen by him? Do you believe that he has grace on top of grace for you? Third, permanence. Maybe 2019 has meant that you have seen God work in ways consistent with His character throughout your story. And you can help tell that story to other people.

God has come in your longing. He has come in the midst of your confession and hiding. He has come with the permanence of his character to give you grace upon grace. That is the gift Christmas for you.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1440-2SC