

We're in a series of Advent messages called "All I Want For Christmas." We're asking that question, what is it we really want for Christmas? If we look at the deepest longings of our heart, if we look deeper than just the desire for a new pair of jeans, or a new relationship, or even a new career, what do we really want? What would really satisfy us?

Last week, we saw what many of us really want is some good news. Now we're going to add one more thing to that list: All I want for Christmas is for God to show up. Have you ever thought that? In the midst of all the injustice, evil, pain, and heartache in our world, have you ever just wanted God to show up and do something? Or perhaps there's a particular area of your life where you're waiting for God to show up — your marriage, your career, your kids, or your friendships.

Lynn and I have been watching a TV show called *God Friended Me*. It's about this guy named Miles, who happens to be a pastor's kid. Miles gets a friend request on Facebook from an account named "God." This account suggests new friends to Miles, people in his hometown of NYC, who need help of some kind. Initially skeptical, Miles decides to follow these suggestions, and he ends up helping these people in amazing ways.

But here's the really interesting thing — Miles is an atheist. He doesn't even believe in God. So he's constantly responding to the needs of the people the God Account sends him, helping them in dramatic ways, but he has no idea who's really behind this God Account. And that question looms over every episode: Who's behind the God Account? Why doesn't he or she show up? Why won't whoever is doing this make an appearance? We're still waiting for that to happen.

It's very interesting, that's also the very thing Isaiah the prophet was waiting for. Seven hundred and fifty years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah cried out to God in a prayer, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down." This a desperate plea for God to literally rip open the skies, come down, and show up.

But why did Isaiah ask this? Let me give you some background. In the first 39 chapters, Isaiah prophesied judgment upon Israel because of their unfaithfulness to God. God spoke through him and said a foreign nation, Babylon, would invade them, destroy Jerusalem, and take God's people into exile. But then starting in chapter 40 and extending through the rest of the book, God brings words of comfort and hope to Israel. God isn't finished with them. He's not washing his hands of them. They're still

his people. Here in chapter 64, in light of this glimmer of hope, Isaiah is praying for his people.

In this prayer, he asks God to come down and show up. What we need to remember is God ultimately answered this prayer in the birth of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God showing up in human flesh. Jesus once said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." The apostle John confirmed this when he wrote, "*No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known*" (Jn 1:18). God has shown up! And yet there's another sense in which we're still waiting for him to show up. Advent also looks forward to the end of history when Jesus will show up again and make all things new.

So I want us to take a close look at Isaiah's prayer in chapter 64:1-9 and see what happens when God comes down and shows up, especially in light of the first and second coming of Jesus Christ. There are three things in this prayer that Isaiah expects to happen when God shows up.

When God shows up, he brings judgment

The first thing is judgment on Israel's enemies, namely Babylon.

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. vv. 1-3

Isaiah wants God to come down and execute judgment on Israel's enemies; to make things right. You can understand that. It was Babylon who'd tear down their temple, rape their women, and slaughter their children. The suffering would be immense and unspeakable. Isaiah wants God to come down and do something about it. Mountains trembling, fire, and boiling water picture God's judgment. Isaiah says if God shows up like that, "the nations will quake before you." When God showed up, Isaiah expected judgment.

You may be thinking, "What could that possibly have to do with Jesus? I mean, isn't Jesus all about love, mercy, and tenderness?" But if you read the New Testament, you can't get away from the fact he did bring judgment. Why was King Herod threatened

by Jesus, so much so, he had all the babies of Bethlehem killed? Because Jesus was born a King, and that threatened Herod.

You see this in Mary's song when she realized she was pregnant. She sang about what God was doing in Jesus,

"He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble." Luke 1:51-52

And Jesus said some very judgmental things during his lifetime. He called the Pharisees "poisonous snakes." That's not very nice! He got so angry with how God's house was being abused that he made a whip, drove everyone out, and overturned their tables. Jesus even said when he returns in glory, he'll sit on his throne, and he'll separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be sent to eternal life but the goats to eternal punishment (Mt. 25:31-32).

Now we may not like this, but here's what we need to understand: The reason for this is Jesus really cares about injustice. In fact, he hates it. He's angry about it. But his anger isn't like our anger. Our anger is often selfish, unpredictable, and petty. But his anger is a settled, fixed, and unchangeable opposition to injustice and evil. His anger and his wrath are such that no debt will go unpaid, every account will be squared, and no act of evil will go unpunished.

Fleming Rutledge is an author who acknowledges the difficulty we have with the idea of Jesus being a God of judgment and wrath. She writes,

"A slogan of our times is 'Where's the outrage?' It's been applied to everything from Big Pharma's market manipulation to CEOs' astronomical wealth to police officers' stonewalling. "Where's the outrage?" inquire many commentators, wondering why congressmen, officials, and ordinary voters seem so indifferent. Why has the gap between rich and poor become so huge? Why are so many mentally ill people slipping through the cracks? Why does gun violence continue to be a hallmark of American culture? Why are there so many innocent people on death row? Why are our prisons filled with such a preponderance of Black and Hispanic men? Where's the outrage?"

And then she says this:

"If we're resistant to the idea of the wrath of God, we might pause to reflect the next time we are outraged about something—about our property values being threatened, or our children's educational opportunities being limited, or our tax breaks being eliminated. All of us are capable of anger about something. God's anger, however, is pure. It doesn't have the maintenance of privilege as its object, but goes out on behalf of those who

have no privileges. The wrath of God isn't an emotion that flares up from time to time, as though God had temper tantrums; it's a way of describing his absolute enmity against all wrong and his commitment to set matters right."

Don't you want a God like that? A God who shows up and deals with all that's wrong in the world? Think about it — it's only because we believe God cares and will deal with evil that we can respond to evil non-violently. The practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance. If God doesn't care, I need to get even now, thank you. But he does care, and he will make things right. When God shows up, that's what he does.

When God shows up, he reveals our sin

This leads us to the second thing Isaiah expected when God showed up. There's quite a bit of irony in this. In the first three verses, he calls down the God of judgment to deal with all the evil out there, but then in the next few verses, we see some of that evil is in us.

Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. 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. 4-7

What's Isaiah saying? When God shows up, he reveals our sin. The very thing we're asking God to judge is in us as well. He starts, "God, you act on behalf of those who wait for you; who trust in you. You help those who do what's right and remember your ways." But then, he says, "But God, we've become unclean. We're being swept away by our sin. None of us calls on your name or strives to know you."

He's saying we deserve as much judgment as anyone else. Isaiah has moved from pointing the finger at everyone else to pointing the finger at himself and those who call themselves God's people. That's exactly what happened when Jesus showed up. He flipped everything on its head. The people who self-righteously lived in the world of verses 1-3; the moral, religious people who pointed the finger at everyone else, hated Jesus because he exposed their hypocrisy. But the ones who knew their sin, who'd moved from the world of verses 1-3 to verses 4-7, were his best friends.

Take Peter, for example. He was a commercial fisherman when Jesus called him, and he dropped his nets and followed him. One thing about Peter you may not know is he was a devout Jew. In fact, in the book of Acts, he says, *"I've never eaten anything impure*

or unclean" (Acts 10:14). So he's an observant Jew who became extremely zealous for Jesus. He was the first to confess Jesus as the Messiah. When Jesus predicted all the disciples would abandon him, Peter says, "Not me! I'll die with you." He's the Rambo among the disciples. When guards came to arrest Jesus, he drew the sword and cut the ear off one of the guards! You see, Peter started in the world of verses 1-3. Like, "I'm one of the good guys, and those people out there are the bad guys." But, little by little, he came to understand verses 4-7. It all came to a head when he denied he even knew Jesus three times. That was the final blow.

Those who live in the self-righteous world of verses 1-3 can look very different. Some are traditionally religious people, moral people. They tell the truth, they go to church, they help the needy, they try hard to live a good life. And these people believe if God were to show up, he'd judge the bad people, not them. They live in the world of verses 1-3.

But then there's another group. These are secular, progressive people. There are lots of them right here in the Bay Area. These people pretty much embrace everyone. Sin, if there is such a thing, is in the eye of the beholder. What's sin for me may not be for you. We just need to embrace everyone. They think the problem in our world is all the intolerant, religious people who judge others. But the truth is they're just like them because they believe the problem is in others, not themselves. It's all those intolerant people that are the problem.

What we all need to understand is God looks deeper. He looks beneath the surface of our lives. Whether we're ultra-religious or ultra-tolerant, he sees into our hearts, and what he really wants is for us to see how deeply broken we are, and how sin runs deep in each of us.

A Calvin and Hobbes comic strip illustrates this. Calvin, a little boy, is flying down a snowy slope on a sled with his friend Hobbes, a tiger, conducting a discussion about Christmas. Here is the dialogue:

Calvin: I'm getting nervous about Christmas.

Hobbes: You're worried you haven't been good?

Calvin: That's just the question. It's all relative. What's Santa's definition? How good do you have to be to qualify as good? I haven't killed anybody. That's good, right? I haven't committed any felonies. I didn't start any wars. I don't practice cannibalism. Wouldn't you say that's pretty good? Wouldn't you say I should get lots of presents?

Hobbes: But maybe good is more than the absence of bad.

Calvin: See, that's what worries me.

In the same way, when Jesus showed up, it didn't matter who he encountered, he always tried to get them to look beneath

the surface and see the real problem is in their heart. That's why Isaiah could say, "Even our righteous acts are like filthy rags." There's always something more beneath the surface, at the level of our motives.

I mean, here you are in church today. That's a good thing! You could have stayed home and watched football or gone to brunch. But WHY did you come? Did you come because you wanted to please your spouse? Did you come because you were afraid if you didn't come, something bad might happen to you this week? Isn't it true, sometimes we do the right thing for the wrong reasons? Maybe we're trying to get God to do something for us, which is trying to control Him, to put him in our debt. And then maybe if something bad happens to you this week you get angry at God because, after all, you went to church! You get even angrier when your friend, who didn't go to church, gets blessed. "What's that all about, God?" Do you see how something like a righteous act such as coming to church can be as filthy rags?

You see, unless we move from verses 1-3 to verses 4-7, unless we look beneath the surface and come to grips with our brokenness and sin, we'll always be judging others and never judging ourselves properly. When God shows up, he reveals our sin.

When God shows up, he reveals his grace

That sets the stage for the third thing Isaiah expects when God shows up. It's important to move from living in the world of verses 1-3 to verses 4-7, but it's equally important to move from verses 4-7 to living in the world of verses 8-9.

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

You can see a change of tone here. When God shows up, he reveals his grace. This doesn't erase what he's already said about God. He's still a God who judges, and we are still deserving of judgment. But look what he says, "Yet, you, Lord, are our Father." That's a big deal! God is rarely called Father in the Old Testament. I'm a father; many of you are fathers. None of us are perfect fathers, but most of us would do pretty much anything for our kids. Fathers love their children! Let's face it, kids do a lot of really dumb things, and we may get upset at them, but we can't stop loving them.

Not only is he our Father, he's also our Creator. Isaiah likens him to a potter; a potter is an artist. We're the clay; he's the potter. We're all the work of his skillful hand. I'm not a very creative person, but I remember in High School woodshop, I made my mom a cutting board. Believe me; it was not a perfect cutting board. It had lots of flaws. But my mom was kind enough to use it. And I was so proud of that cutting board because I made it with my own hands!

This doesn't mean God doesn't care about sin. This doesn't mean he's just some benevolent, harmless, jolly, old, grandpa. That's why Isaiah prays in verse nine immediately after calling God Father, "Don't be angry beyond measure, Lord; don't remember our sins forever." That would be nice, but how can that happen? How can a just God say, "It's no big deal?" A good father knows you can't just turn your head and pretend nothing happened. And it's true with God. The only way for God to not be angry and not remember our sins is for his justice to be satisfied. I think Isaiah understood this. Why? If you go back a few chapters, you'll see he spoke of one called "the Servant of the Lord." Listen to what he said about him,

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:4-6

Jesus is who these verses reference. You see, it was God's love that compelled him to send his Son as the One who'd satisfy his anger. His great love compelled him to judge his Son instead of us. The Bible says, "*God so loved the world he gave his only Son...*" It was God's love that compelled him to send his Son as the One who'd satisfy his justice.

There's an important word in the Bible — propitiation. It means doing something that satisfies God so that God moves from being angry with us to being at peace with us. But we could never do that ourselves, so God did it. God provided the one thing that could satisfy his anger; he put his Son on the cross. That's why Jesus came. That's why we celebrate Christmas. Because this One born in a manger is the One who bore our sin. Jesus was the judge who was judged.

It's because of that, we can really know him as our Father. Sometimes my kids will call me by my first name just for fun. "Maarrk," they'll say. And I go along with it, but I really want them to call me dad. Why is that such a big deal? Well, it's because they don't want me to start treating them as though they only knew me as Mark. They need me to be dad, not Mark. Friends call me Mark. I'm not sure I'd die for most of my friends. But I'd die for my kids. So, they should call me dad. Because of what Jesus did for us, we can call God, Father. Only through the

Son can we call him Father. We can't know the fatherhood of God without embracing the Sonship of Jesus.

What happens when God shows up?

When God shows up, he brings judgment on injustice and evil

When God shows up, he shows us we are part of the problem

When God shows up, he reveals his grace and removes our sin

You know, Advent is a strange season. On the one hand, we know God has already shown up to make things right in the person of Jesus. We want to sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come." That's what Christmas is all about. And yet, strangely, during Advent, we still wait for Him to show up again. We wait because not everything is right. We wait because there's a lot that's still wrong, but the next time he shows up, he'll finish what he started and make it right. That's what Advent is all about. That's why we still sing, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear."

Years ago, in the days before the Christmas of 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sat in prison in Nazi Germany. He was there because, unlike many other Lutheran pastors, he refused to place a picture of Hitler on the altar of his church. During that time, he wrote a letter to his fiancé and compared his waiting in prison to the waiting of Advent. He wrote,

"A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes, does various unessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent."

To gain his freedom, all Bonhoeffer could do was wait, because the prison door had to be unlocked and opened from the outside. Someone else had to do it. In the same way, God will show up again, not because a bunch of people did something good, but as a gift to those whose arms are stretched out in longing—to those who eagerly wait for the wrong in the world and the wrong in them to be made right.

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

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