

## REND THE HEAVENS!

The First Sunday in Advent: November 30, 2014

Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

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### The Collect for Advent

*Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

The first Sunday in Advent is New Year's Day according to the Christian liturgical calendar. Instead of beginning in January, we start the new year with Advent, because that's where our story as Christians begins. Advent is the time when we remember what it was like before the first Christmas, before the birth of Jesus. It is a time when the days are getting shorter and shorter, darker and darker, and we *long* for the light. It's a time to pause and pay attention to that deep sense of longing within.

What are you longing for at this time of year? Do you miss loved ones who have died or are far away? Are you feeling alone? Are you hoping for some breakthrough or answered prayer in your life? Do you hope that Santa will bring you a special Christmas gift? Are you longing for God to bring an end to suffering and violence around the world?

Our story begins before sin entered the world, when everything was good and right, and when God and humanity lived together in harmony. But we rebelled and turned away from God, and the results were disastrous. Sin separated us from God, and left us with a "God-shaped vacuum" (Blaise Pascal) that nothing else could fill. Consequently, to one degree or another, all humanity feels what the Prophet Isaiah felt when he exclaimed:

*Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down! (Isaiah 64:1 ESV)*

Like a wailing, grieving widow, beating on her husband's tombstone, crying for him to come back to her, Isaiah cried out for God to break through the barrier of sin, to come back and set the world to rights. "Save us, Lord! Rend the heavens!"

And of course, that's what Christmas is all about, isn't it? On the very first Christmas, the angels sang and the shepherds and wise men worshiped because God *had* come down. In Jesus, God became man in order to save people from sin.

Why then, do Christians rewind their calendars each year at this time and return to this deep sense of longing? Why relive the heartache of those dark days before Christ?

In Christ, the light of the world has dawned, but there's still so much darkness: both "out there" in a world staggering under the weight of sin, and within our own hearts, where our longing for God waxes and wanes conversely with our worldly passions. This deep sense of longing, the quintessential mood of Advent, is God's early Christmas gift to us. What are we to do with it? What follows is a devotional intended to help us make the most of Advent this year.

## REND THE HEAVENS!

*Rend* is an old-fashioned word meaning "to rip, split, or tear." It reminds me of two important rips or tears that happened in the life of Jesus—one at the beginning of his ministry, and one at the end. I'll never forget reading through the Gospel of Mark in Greek for the first time, and seeing how God tore open the heavens at Jesus' baptism. Mark writes:

*And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens **being torn open** (σχιζομένων) and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:10-11)*

The Greek verb for "tearing open" used here is familiar to us: *schizo* (σχιζω), as in "schism" or "schizophrenia." When I first saw this in Mark's Gospel, I thought: "How ironic! There's a schism (split) happening here, but it represents the opposite of what we've come to expect of schisms."

Think of how we usually use this word. There's the "Great Schism" of 1054, when the church divided into East and West. There are all the church schisms in modern history, e.g. whether globally within the Anglican Communion, or locally when a congregation breaks apart. Or think of all the kinds of splits that happen all the time between couples, friends, and business partners. In all of these instances, schism is the result of sin. But in Mark's Gospel, following Jesus' baptism, it is God who causes the schism. Can any kind of schism be good news?

This one was. The heavens were split, the Spirit descended upon Jesus, and God the Father proclaimed his love and pleasure in his Son. It's no accident that Mark described what happened in this way. Mark was deeply familiar with Isaiah, and he very likely had Isaiah 64:1 in mind when he wrote about Jesus' baptism. Mark understood and believed that what God was doing in Christ was what Isaiah had begged God to do centuries earlier when he said:

*Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down! (Isaiah 64:1 ESV)*

There at the Jordan River, as Jesus came up out of the water, it was as if God was saying, *I have rent the heavens, and here is my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased.*

## REND THE HEAVENS, REND OUR HEARTS!

But after God split the heavens and came down in Christ, he didn't rescue his people in the way that Isaiah was expecting, nor John the Baptist for that matter. Isaiah hoped that God would somehow intervene and come to the aid of his people, as he did in the past when he rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. He begged God to come down again, as before, when he sent the plagues upon Egypt, and then he met his people atop Mt Sinai. Come down again, said Isaiah, so that:

*"the mountains might quake at your presence—  
as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
and that the nations might tremble at your presence!  
When you did awesome things that we did not look for,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. (Isaiah 64:1b-3 ESV)*

Those were the good old days, when God tore open the heavens and sent the plagues on Egypt. That was when God split the Red Sea for his people to cross through unharmed. That was when God came down on the mountain and entered into a marriage covenant with his people.

However, Jesus' ministry wasn't like that at all.<sup>1</sup> What Isaiah wanted, Jesus didn't do, because in Jesus' day, God's people were still enslaved by sin. Isaiah knew of this problem as he wrote Isaiah 64; he knew that his people were a far cry from the glory days of Mt. Sinai. They had long since turned away from God and fallen into idolatry among the Canaanites. And so Isaiah knew that it was their own sin that had caused a schism between them and God. Listen to how he described it, as if they had some kind of infectious disease:

*Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;  
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?  
We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. (Isaiah 64:5b-6a ESV)*

Because of their sin, they were separated from God. And so without God, they felt as helpless as a leaf blown by the wind:

*We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. (Isaiah 64:6b ESV)*

They were in desperate need of God, but separated from him because of the great schism of sin:

*There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities. (Isaiah 64:7 ESV)*

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<sup>1</sup> The rest of Mark's Gospel offers an explanation for why God did not send his Son as a military deliverer, but instead as an atoning sacrifice.

We come now to Isa 64:8-9, and the starting point of Advent, because in longing for God, we're longing for our own transformation. Unless God cleanses us of sin, we don't want him to come down. If God comes down again as before, shaking the mountains, and he finds our hearts are closed to him, then we all will most certainly be consumed by his brilliant holiness. So we must begin with humility. Isaiah writes:

*But now, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever.  
Behold, please look, we are all your people. (Isaiah 64:8-9 ESV)*

The starting point for Advent is humility before the Lord. As we call out to God to rend the heavens, we must also call upon him to **rend our hearts**. These are the words used by the Prophet Joel as he warned people about the coming "Day of the Lord."

*"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and **rend your hearts** and not your garments."  
Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.  
(Joel 2:12-13 ESV)*

Jesus is not at all what any of us were expecting, but he is the Savior of the World. If we're to experience his salvation, we must become clay in the potter's hands. As we call out to God to rend the heavens, we must also call upon him to rend our hearts.

## **REND THE HEAVENS, REND THE CURTAIN!**

If we're to make the most of Advent, we also must come to Christmas by way of Good Friday.

As we have seen, Mark began the story of Jesus with a surprising schism. He also ended his story with one:

*34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 35 And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." 36 And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." 37 And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. 38 And the curtain of the temple **was torn** (ἐσχίσθη) in two, from top to bottom. 39 And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:34-39)*

When Jesus died on the cross, the temple curtain barring the way to the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant was split in half, from top to bottom. This curtain was a symbol of the barrier between heaven (where God's holy brilliance is clearly visible) and earth (where God's holy brilliance is shrouded because of our sin). When Jesus died, that curtain was torn in two.

Why? Because Jesus' died for our sins, a substitute in our place. Through his broken body and his precious blood we who put our faith in him are rendered clean. By faith in Jesus, Christian believers can cross the cosmic threshold between heaven and earth and enter God's presence.

Again, the remarkable thing about the way Mark uses schism here and at the beginning of the Gospel that it's a split that causes a union. Usually a split causes a split, as with a split personality, or a split marriage, or a banana split. But the torn curtain was a split that led to union and reconciliation.

So if we're to make the most of Advent, we must first rend our hearts and become clay in the potter's hands. Second, we must come to Christmas by way of Good Friday and the curtain torn in two.

As they say, Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. It's good that our whole country celebrates Christmas, even if it is primarily a feast of consumerism. But if you haven't yet trusted in Jesus as your savior, you're only scratching the surface of what Christmas could be. It's like sniffing the cork, when you could be drinking the whole bottle. The true joy of Christmas is Immanuel, God with us. Believe in Jesus and experience the joy of peace with God.

If you are already a Christian, then Advent is a time for you to draw near to God. Like Lent, Advent is traditionally a season for fasting in some fashion, so that in giving up or doing without we might have more time and space to be with God. It's a time to turn off, unplug, choose simplicity, etc. so that in the darkness there might be one clear candle burning, and that's the light of the world. Jesus rent the curtain, so that we may draw near to God. Seize the day and the season. Read the Word, which is the primary way God speaks to earth from heaven. Make use of an Advent devotional. Fast and use your mealtimes to pray and be still before the Lord. Take up some discipline so that all the sparkling lights of the holiday season don't overshadow the light of the world.

## **REND THE HEAVENS, REND GOOD AND EVIL!**

If we're to make the most of Advent, we also should prepare for the last schism when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. The big surprise of the New Testament was not that God changed his mind about setting the world to rights. God will indeed wipe away every tear and make all things new. Rather, the big surprise of the New Testament is that God in his mercy delayed the last judgment, so that all people might yet come to him by faith and experience his mercy. There will be a second Advent, when Jesus, the Son of Man, will return in a cloud of glory just as God appeared at Mt. Sinai (Mark 13:26). Then Jesus will gather all his followers to him, both those who are living, and those whom Paul described as having fallen asleep in Christ (1 Thess 4:13). This day is still coming. The delay is a gift of God's mercy.

The last judgment will be the last schism because it will result in a final separation. Just as in the days of Noah, when those who rejected the Lord perished in the flood, at the last judgment the wall of separation between God and humanity finally will come completely down, and there will be a flood of God's holiness across the earth. On that day, all who are covered by the blood of

Christ will be protected; everything else that is distorted by sin will be consumed by God's holiness as he makes all things new.

We who are Christians ought not to be frightened by this doctrine. Paul says at the end of 1 Thess 4, "Therefore encourage one another with these words." For the early church, the last judgment wasn't frightening but reassuring, because it meant that God would someday set the world to rights. Paul goes on to say:

*God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up. (1 Thess 5:9-11a)*

If we aren't to be frightened, but instead to encourage and build one another up, how then shall we do it? I suggest that we tap into that sense of longing that comes at this time each year. In particular, we ought to long for *reconciliation*, and make it our ambition as we await the last judgment. We ought to long for the reconciliation of others to God, and we ought to long for the reconciliation of ourselves with others:

1. As we meditate on the last judgment, it should make us long for reconciliation between God and our neighbors. If we truly love our neighbors, then we will be motivated to share the good news of Jesus with them. They have no hope apart from the blood of Christ. What kind of neighbor am I if my neighbor is sick and I know the cure but don't tell him? What kind of neighbor am I if my neighbor is in danger and I know how to protect him but I don't do it? How will our neighbors be saved from God's holiness if they don't hear and partake of the blood of Christ? Let us do all that we can to seek reconciliation between God and our neighbors.

2. The other way the last judgment ought to motivate us is in keeping short accounts with others and seeking reconciliation with others. Think of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, which is a wonderful Advent reading. Think of what happens to Ebenezer Scrooge that Christmas Eve as he is visited by the ghost of his old partner, and then by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future. He is reminded of the Last Judgment, and it changes his whole demeanor. As soon as he realizes the consequences of his own selfishness in the lives of those around him, he makes reconciliation his primary ambition. He hops out of bed on Christmas morning, gives thanks to be alive, and has the best day of his life, particularly through making amends with the Cratchit family. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians (1 Thess 5:6) to "keep awake and be sober," rather than escaping from the reality of the coming judgment. In other words, live each day wisely, as if the Lord will return at any moment. Make the most of the time, and as far as it depends upon you, live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:18). Seek reconciliation with others in anticipation of the last judgment.

## REND THE HEAVENS, BIND US TOGETHER!

Finally, let the longing of this season drive you to communion with the Lord and his people. Because we long to be with God forever, and to be together forever, let us come to the table and keep the feast.

We live between the first and second advents of Christ, but it's not as if we never have contact with the Lord. We do whenever we gather together as the body of Christ. And most precious of all is the gift of the Lord's Supper, when for a moment we are able to experience the joy of reconciliation in an especially tangible and beautiful way. At communion, we draw together as one family, demonstrating to God, each other, and a heavenly cloud of witnesses—those who have fallen asleep in Christ—that we are indeed reconciled with God and one another. Therefore, if you have anything against your brother or sister, leave your gift at the altar, go pass the peace, and then come (Matthew 5:23-24). This meal is a sign of reconciliation, and a foretaste of that day when all our longings will be fulfilled.

At communion, it is the Lord Jesus Christ who binds us together as one family. By his blood we are saved, and we have nothing to fear in the last judgment. By his blood we are able to cross the threshold of this world and pass through the torn curtain into the heavens and the presence of Almighty God. By his blood, we are held together as the family of God, without fear of schism.

*This Advent season, rend the heavens and come down, O God!*

*Rend our hearts. You are the potter and we are the clay.*

*Rend the curtain, and open up for us the way into your presence.*

*Rend good and evil, swallowing up the darkness with your glorious light.*

*And bind us together, that no schism may tear apart that which you have reconciled in Jesus' name. Amen.*