

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Isaiah captures the plea of the ancient Israelites, a community looking for a dramatic intervention from the God of love into their world of fear. For they live in exile: These people live far away from their true home; They’re not sure if things will ever go back to the way they were; They wonder if their kids and grandkids will grow up with the same opportunities, speaking the same language, living by the same standards as they did.

And while they know God has kept promises to them in the past, they recognize that this one hasn’t come to fruition, And God feels very, very, far away.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Can you feel this plea? O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! So that the mountains would quake at your presence. O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! as when fire kindles brushwood and as fire causes water to boil. O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! So that the world might tremble at your presence.

How many times have we prayed this prayer in our lives? How many places have we found ourselves with this request on our lips? O that you would rend the heavens and come down...into the doctor’s office while we wait for the test results. O that you would rend the heavens and come down...and into the addictions and bad habits, grief and burdens we need release from.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...into the arguments that tear apart our families...into the differences that tear apart our nation...into the places torn apart by violence.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...” is a prayer and lament for times when and where we need God to *be there*; for God to make us know that God is present, among us, in a way we can hear, see, and perceive. It is a prayer for times when and where God feels very, very far away... when it feels like it’s been a while, and “no one has heard, no ear as perceived, no eye has seen” God.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...” is the kind of prayer that raises questions about our own sinful state and actions. For Isaiah and his people are wavering, as faithful people do, over whether we are responsible for God’s absence: Is God absent because of our sin? Did God hide because of our transgression? Has our iniquity taken us away from God? Has God abandoned us because we are bad? Isaiah reckons—and we do too— with a God whom he and his people find not only transcendent and hidden in the heavens but also with a stake in their world; A God who seems far away but willing to come close to them.

The Prayers of Day for our season of Advent reflect Isaiah’s prayer and reckoning with God. For the next four weeks of Advent, All of the Prayers of the Day at the beginning of worship begin by pleading to God to “Stir up.”

Today, the First Sunday of Advent prayer, says, “Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come” to “awaken us to the threatening dangers of our sins.” The second Sunday prays, “Stir up our hearts, Lord God, to prepare the way of your only Son.” On the third we pray, “Stir up the wills of your faithful people...that we may testify to your light” and the fourth, “Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come...that willingly we may bear your redeeming love to all the world.”

These prayers are ancient words for Christians, written sometime in the six- or seven-hundreds. One tradition says they recall the stirring that monks in the kitchen would do for their Christmas puddings. And they echo the words of the psalmist, “Stir up your might and come and save us.”

These “stirring” prayers help us acknowledge all the ways we fall short so that we may ask Christ’s presence to come among us and change us. They are our way of praying to the God who is at once transcendent and reigns over the cosmos and at the same time also willing to come close and show up in our world.

With these “stirring” prayers, we, with Christians all around the world and with God’s people throughout time, share the Good News that we do NOT have a God who stays far away. These prayers and Isaiah’s petitions remind us that we have a God who is both on the way and who is also already here.

For Isaiah concludes his pleas with this image: “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”

God is never far from us. Our God is a potter: an artist willing to get dirty hands while picking us up like clay to mold us into vessels, no matter the useless lumps we may see ourselves to be.

God is a potter willing to get clay under her nails as she remolds us into new wares no matter the amounts of cracks or chips we have already.

God is a cook who lets nothing sit on the back-burner but who carefully stirs the seasonal pudding with love and patience to get it to the desired consistency.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, O God.”
 “Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come.” For you are the potter, we are the clay. You are the cook, we are the work of your hand. We are waiting. We are ready. Come, come now.

AMEN.

Rev. Kathryn L. Pocalyko
 Lutheran Church of Our Saviour
 North Chesterfield, Virginia
 November 26, 2017

First Sunday of Advent (observed)
 Isaiah 64:1-9
 Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
 1 Corinthians 1:3-9
 Mark 13:24-37

