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Advent 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Oh Wait!”

Text: Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 11:1-10; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down! So Isaiah writes and Israel hopes.

Can you imagine what that would look like? What kind of terror that would cause? The sky ripped open and something, someone, from another world coming down to earth? The scenes like that we see in so many movies *really happening* . . .

But why want God to come like that? To get their adversaries, of course. To pay back the nations around Israel for their sins. To consume them like fire. Make them tremble like they've made us tremble! Show 'em who's boss. Show them the God they don't believe in.

But then Isaiah thinks better of it. *Oh wait*, he says. We're sinners, too. ***All our righteous deeds*** aren't so righteous at all. In fact, they ***are like a polluted garment***. We don't pray as we should. We don't believe and trust as we should. We make our neighbors tremble, too, when we lash out at them. If God came down as fire, that fire would burn us, too.

So maybe not. So no, don't rend the heavens. Not yet anyway. Instead, Isaiah says, humbly changing his tune: no, be ***our Father. We are the clay, you are our potter***. Don't destroy us - help us, shape us, form us. ***Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people***.

Isaiah's words are good ones for us to consider today. For when we think like that. When we wish God would smite our adversaries - that kid at school who picked on me, that person at work who took credit for my work, that person who took my parking space even though I'd been waiting for it with my blinker on! Or those lawmakers trying to take away our religious freedom, those infidels beheading Christians, or those liberals who call themselves Christians but are really gutting Christianity of its truth. *Get 'em God! Pay them back, God! Why don't you wipe them out?*

Because, Isaiah is teaching us today, that means He would wipe us out, too. The sins we see in others are the sins that live in us.

So while the day is coming when God will *rend the heavens and come down* in judgment, that not really what He wants to do. Do you know that? God doesn't want to judge. Judging holds no joy for God. Judgment is of the law, but God - though He *gave* the Law - is not first and foremost about the law. God would rather love and save and forgive and bless. God would rather give gifts, and He does. To all people - life and health and rain and all that we have - even if we don't realize it.

No, God gave the Law not so that we would love the Law, but so that we would love *Him*. So that we would, like Isaiah, realize our sin and turn to Him as our Father, our Saviour.

So instead of *rending the heavens and coming down* with fire, the Son of God came in our flesh and blood. Instead of riding on the clouds of heaven, He rode into Jerusalem, as we heard, on a young colt, a donkey. And instead of consuming sinners He became the sinner and offered Himself to the consuming fire of His Father's wrath against sin on the cross. That our iniquity, our sins, not be (as Isaiah prayed) remembered or held against us, but that we get His gifts instead.

But maybe we're like Isaiah even here, too, when thinking about the gifts of God. For if Isaiah wanted God to come with a big show and great power, rending the heavens . . . I wonder if **that's how we want our gifts**. Big stuff. Impressive stuff. For God to come down and make us win the lottery. For God to come down and give us a church. For God to come down and give us success. For God to come down and give *you* . . . what?

But maybe, like Isaiah realized, there's something else we need before all that; before God rends the heavens and comes down with gifts like that. Maybe we need the humbler gifts first. So that we love not the stuff we want God to give us, but love Him instead.

Because that's what often happens, isn't it? We love the stuff instead. Even the stuff we don't have yet - that's why we want it. And even holy stuff, like a church building or a church full of people, can become an idol. Those things aren't bad, but they can be. They can become idols if we love them or the thought of them more than our Father who gives them. That happened to Old Testament Israel, too. They came to love the Temple more than the God who dwelled in it and the gifts He gave in it.

So maybe we need an Isaiah moment; an "*oh wait*" moment; an *Advent* moment. For Advent is about waiting. Waiting for our God to come, and rejoicing in His coming now. Even if it is humbly now. Even if it's not quite what we want now. Knowing it's what we need now. Because what we need now is a little forming; a little God's-hands-on-us-as-a-potter now. To shape us and make us into the people He would have us be. A holy people. A people forgiven and forgiving. Who don't breathe fire at each other, but serve in flesh and blood instead, riding donkeys, and laying down our lives for each other. To form us into Christians, little Christs, children of our Father in heaven.

The people of Jerusalem needed such an “*oh wait*” moment, too. When Jesus rode into town that day and they shouted out their ***Hosannas, spread their cloaks on the road, and waved their palm branches***, they weren’t quite thinking of the right kind of kingdom Jesus had come to give them. They were hoping for a big, glorious kingdom, not a humble one. A triumphant one, not a crucified one. That kingdom was coming, is coming, but not yet. They would have to wait for it. They needed another one first. A humbler one first.

So when Jesus rode that donkey all the way to the cross, their hopes weren’t dashed - *they were fulfilled*. They just didn’t know it yet. They didn’t yet know that this humbler gift was actually a greater gift. And His kingdom a greater kingdom. For a kingdom here and now might be great, but it wouldn’t last. The old Israel didn’t last, and a new one wouldn’t either. But a heavenly one will. And wealth here won’t last; but there is wealth that doesn’t perish, spoil, or fade. And life here will come to an end; but there is a life that won’t. So you tell me - which is the greater gift?

So, “*oh wait*” . . . maybe what I want isn’t good at all; **maybe what I have is**. Maybe these gifts here, though rather humble looking, are actually greater. Words that don’t glorify me but tell of the glory of God. Gifts that don’t make me richer here but give me life instead. A meal that doesn’t fill my stomach but fills my soul with the Body and Blood of God Himself; and that doesn’t wipe out my enemies but wipes out my sins instead.

“*Oh wait*” - here is God for me. Here is God for me. Here is God for me. Just what I need. All that I need.

And it really is - all that you need. Paul wrote that to the Corinthians in the words that we heard today. Because they didn’t believe it either. Because we need more, we need something greater, bigger, better, impressive . . .

But no, Paul said. ***You are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*** You have all that you need. As you wait. As you wait for the revealing. As you wait for God to ***rend the heavens and come down*** on the Last Day. What we have may look humble - as humble as a birth in a manger, as humble as a man riding a donkey - but it is not so humble as it looks. The glory is there, the power is there, God is there, just hidden. Hidden for us. So that we not tremble, but rejoice in His coming.

And we do, now, repenting of our sins and receiving Him in these humble means of His grace. We rejoice.

And we will, too, on the Last Day, when our bodies will be raised from death - unless He comes sooner than that. But there will be joy that day too for us. For we know the One who is coming on that day. He is our Father, our Saviour, our brother. He is our forgiver, our sanctifier, the One with scars on His hands, feet, and side. On that day there will be no more “*oh wait*” - only come. Come now, into the kingdom, into the glory, I have prepared for you. Come now into the joy that has no end.

So we prayed: *Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance* (Collect of the Day). *Oh wait . . .* He did. He is. And He will.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.