

First Sunday of Advent (b)
Isaiah 64:1-9 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 Mark 13:24-37
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
November 29, 2020 (Online Only)

At my college, towards the end of each semester, they always scheduled a primal scream night. That's where students could go outside their dorms and scream their lungs out at the sky, all at the same time. So you'd hear it across the whole campus. Everyone letting go of all that pent-up stress during finals week.

The first reading today, from Isaiah, is one of the best primal screams in the bible. There are a lot of them, but this is one of the best. Let me reread those first verses from Isaiah for you; but as I read I want you to imagine me screaming like a cornered animal. I want you to imagine my head about to explode. "Oh, God, just rip the heavens apart right now and come down here to me; I need you to shake the mountains to their foundations." I'm a Danish heritage Lutheran, so I'm genetically incapable of raising my voice in church. But that was a scream. And my soul has screamed like Isaiah's before. And I'll bet most of you have felt that way too at some point in your lives: Like a cornered animal. You are stuck in your situation; you don't see any way out. You are dying to be saved. You want your life to change so badly, that you could scream.

And at those times, if you remembered to call on God, you weren't wanting a gentle, reasonable God, were you? Didn't you just want him to rip apart the heavens and enter into your life? When you know you need to be saved from whatever's going on in your life...whether it's a sickness you're trapped in, an addiction you're mired in, bad mistakes that you've made, a bad relationship, the impending death of someone you love, or evil things that other people are doing to you...when we are screaming to be saved, I mean...forget reasonableness. We need an intervention. We need God to tear apart the heavens; we need him to turn the world upside-down. We scream for him to rip away all the barriers that stand between you and that new life you need so badly.

How many of you have been in a long-distance relationship with someone you love passionately? Well, you know how bad it stinks—it's one of the worst things in the world. I

was separated by distance from Karen for way too long. And it got to the point where I couldn't take it any longer. I finally texted her, "honey, this is too much. I can't eat, I can't rest, I can't think...I can't live like this. I've got to know when we're going to be together." She texted back, "I'm at Kroger. If you're really that bad off we can meet for lunch." But seriously, the worst agony we experience in this life is separation. During these crazy times, a lot of us know it way too well. Separation from that one we adore, that's where the deepest primal screams come from. And that's where Isaiah's scream is coming from.

What a terrible verse that is, further on in the reading: "you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins." How terrible, to feel like the source of your life, the source of all love, the source of your future—the one who holds your life in his hands—how terrible to feel that he has hidden his face from you! Here we are, left to deal with all our own weaknesses. Left to face our mortality. Here we are, left to our fears. Shouldn't Christians be as honest as Isaiah and go right to the heart of our broken selves, and admit that our biggest problem is separation from God? Our problem is not that we don't have enough money or education, or good health, or intelligence or wisdom or all these commodities that we think are going to guarantee us a good life. Our biggest problem is that the key relationship in our lives is broken. And as long as that relationship is broken, nothing else can fill us up. We know we're built for something more. We live every day for something more that we just assume is out there—a better life, a better love. But when we don't know where new life comes from...when all we see is just a broken situation that'll never change...that's when we see the darkness honestly. That darkness is what Isaiah's primal scream comes out of.

We see that darkness, just for example, when we, or someone we love, is sick. It's like, Come on, God...where are you? Why am I here, waiting to know whether my body is going to heal, waiting for the next appointment, waiting to hear the news from the doctor? Rip the heavens apart, and come down! Or you look at the world, the way it is today. It's easy to lose hope. The hateful way people treat each other, the breakup of families, the lack of respect for human life, the nihilism, the selfishness, the greed; the sense of entitlement, the blaming, the moral relativism, the apathy. People are walking around angry at everything. They feel trapped. Like they're fighting a losing battle every day. And like Isaiah says, it feels like all our righteous acts

are filthy rags. In other words, nothing we do seems to make a difference. The river of negativity and decay is too deep. So, Come on, God...where are you? Rip the heavens apart! Don't give us over to our sins! Don't let us be swept away in that river of apathy and negativity and anger. How much longer can we wait? Come to us...re-establish us! Lift us up—lift our nation up—from this death!

During this Advent season, we're preparing for Christmas. In a way, this is the season that helps us see how much we need Christmas. We need an intervention. Isaiah has lost hope in himself and in people. He's looking at his nation's pain, their misery, their sense of being trapped in a bad situation that's too big for them. And he knows, God is the only one who can fix this. That new life won't come out of human beings. They need God to turn his face towards them, directly. It's like: I don't need more wisdom. I don't need more words. I don't need a better philosophy or soundbites or a new way of thinking. I need the love—the higher love, the greater love, the primal love—that I'm missing. I need God to be here with me. I need full communion with the one I'm missing. Anything that starts with **me**, cannot end with **him**. I need **him** to rip the heaven open, and come right here to be with **me**.

It's amazing to realize that, about 500 years after Isaiah's primal scream in today's first lesson, after he begged God to rend the heavens and come down...500 years later scripture brings us to the Jordan River, where Jesus is baptized by John. And remember what the gospels tell us: at Jesus' baptism the heavens were ripped open, and the Holy Spirit came down and rested on Jesus. So, that new life—the power of heaven, the life of the Kingdom, the power of God himself—is now coming into this world through Jesus. Jesus is God's final intervention. Jesus is God's answer to Isaiah's primal scream. That means that you and I, and anybody now, anybody who's screaming in that place of darkness, can find the relationship they were built for. They can find what they've always been looking for...communion, full communion with God through Jesus Christ.

God has answered us. Not with new commandments, not with new instructions on how to get to him, but by entering into our lives with us. So when we're asking where God is in our sicknesses, where are you God, when I'm dealing with this cancer, with this chronic illness, with

this pain; where are you God, in this broken society, in all this conflict and uncertainty and all these wicked power games that are going on; where are you, God, in the middle of this broken relationship, this painful marriage, this heartbreak...when we ask “where are you, God?” we see God’s face in Jesus Christ. We see him nailed, hanging on a cross. We see this Lord who went into the deepest darkness, and who beat it for us, to be with us, no matter what darkness we’re in. In Christ, we see God’s true face. He has turned his true face to us now, permanently.

For a long time now, people have argued that life has become so comfortable that we’re able to hide from that inner brokenness that’s common to us all. Look around: the world is self-centered, and that doesn’t make for good relationships. It doesn’t make for love. Families are broken. You see a divided nation, an unhealthy culture. And I think more and more, you sense a primal scream building up all around us.

It’s like Isaiah says: “No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us.” As believers, we know that God **has turned his true face** to the world, permanently, in Jesus. Every day, we can look into those eyes of love. We’ve been given this amazing gift, this miracle of being able to hear his word for us and be in communion with him: full communion—body, soul and mind. We look to the future—we know we need a new life. And here God comes in Jesus Christ, giving us a downpayment on that future already, when we didn’t deserve it. And not only can we be part of that future now already here on earth, we have the privilege right here, in our congregation, in our work, in our families, of serving him, of actually representing him in the world. We’ve been given this amazing gift, so we can reach out and love people and show them what they’re really looking for...show them where they can meet their Savior and hear his living voice.