

Grace be to you and Peace from the One who is, who was and is to come, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me. For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father; our Redeemer from of old is your name. Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you? Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage. Your holy people took possession for a little while; but now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name. O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, your Word itself empowers us to speak in your Name. Send us your Spirit of comfort and hope, so that we may truly hear what you have to say to us. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Dear congregation!

Isaiah was a prophet of God, a religious professional. Like us, he would have been a regular churchgoer, – he wasn't having trouble believing that God existed. No, he knew beyond a shadow of doubt that God was out there somewhere. The problem was, even though it was clear God was around (somewhere), God seemed suddenly far away, hidden, silent, absent. Even for the prophet of God, even for the people of God, the absence loomed large.

He felt the absence strongly and Isaiah wailed: "Oh that you would tear the heavens, that you would come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence!" (v. 1).

The situation of the Old Testament people of God cannot easily be compared to our situation today, 2 500 years later.

Too much has changed since Isaiah's time as that we can simply transfer that situation into our own today. And yet there are words in this age - old Psalm of lament that have stood the test of time and are still able to speak into our post-modern lives today. Because at the centre of this psalm is the lament that the God of the people of Israel has become dark, silent, and absent.

That sounds very familiar. God has become for many people in our day and age a big question mark: His existence, His personality, His hiddenness, His silence. So, from these observations it is very possible to build a bridge from the time of Isaiah to ours. There are many people out there today that are suffering the pain of the hiddenness of God or Godforsakenness even, whether they know it or not.

There are the countless deeply upsetting happenings that are going on in our world, that make us question God and His righteousness and as to why He seems silent about all of it; there's the countless painful experiences and disappointments in our own personal lives that dump us in the deep darkness of depression and anxiety and make us ask the question: does God even care?

Does He see what is happening in my life and what it is doing to me? Where is He when I'm hurting, when my life is falling apart, when my dreams lay shattered in a million pieces and I don't know where to begin to pick them up?

Adding to that are the intellectual doubts that can't seem to keep the God of the Bible and our modern understanding of the world and of reality together anymore. Countless contemporaries settle for the notion that God is not only silent but has left the world over to its own devices.

God is absent! From this point of view, it only takes another small step towards having the attitude that one is finished with God and can safely block God out of mind and heart.

Not so with this prophet, that desperately wants to reach our ears on this day.

He does not give resignation any room, he does not let go of hope, but instead clings onto the experiences that his forefathers have made with God. He reminds himself of the great deeds that God has done in history and in his own life too. He reminds himself of all the good that God let him experience and enjoy in His life, the countless blessings.

From that vantage point he gains the courage to take his pleas and lay them in God's ear. ***You are our Father!*** This reference to God as "our father" suggests both an intimate connection and probably an obligation on the part of God the father to look after his children. The prophet reminds Yahweh that he is their father and that He has a responsibility towards His children. You cannot abandon us, God. For you are our Father, our Creator! **God cannot ignore the implications of this binding relationship.**

Us, who are sitting here today listening to these words are in a far more privileged position than Isaiah was back then. We are one giant step ahead of the prophet and the people he spoke to about God's presence and absence. God did reveal Himself. But not in a way that the prophet would have expected, with mountains quacking and a great consuming fire. God came under cover.

The God that should have made nations tremble, became the companion of the poor and downtrodden; he became the comforter and friend of those in doubt and anguish and despair. The prophet's plea that God would tear open the heavens and come down has happened: In Jesus Christ God ripped open the heavens and came down.

He revealed himself. The hidden-ness of God is not an empty void, not since Jesus came and showed us what God is really like. Colossians 1:15 clearly says that he, "is the image of the invisible God..." Jesus put a shape to the absence. Jesus offers a face to the hidden God. And when we sense the absence, we cannot help but focus on the shape, the presence. The One that tore the heavens open, died on a cross...

The cross on Calvary demonstrates that God has not abandoned us to our pain and anguish. The grief and sufferings that afflict our lives are so real and so significant to God that he willed to share them and endure them himself. He too is "acquainted with grief." On that day, Jesus himself experienced the silence of God - it was Psalm 22, not Psalm 23, that he quoted from the cross: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

(Yancey, P. Disappointment with God, 2007:521).

The mystery of it all was that it was God himself who came to earth and died. God was not "up there" watching the tragic events conspire "down here." God was in Christ. The record of Jesus' life on earth should forever answer one of our deepest and most painful life questions, "How does God feel about my pain?" In reply, God did not give us empty words or theories on the problem of pain. He gave us himself. Yes, God does care about our suffering and pain. He died of it...

(Yancey, P. Where is God when it hurts? 1990:226,227)

Our text from Isaiah shows us how Israel yearned for God to be made known. And that yearning was answered in Jesus Christ. And our yearning is still answered in him. When we stop and look, we can see the light of God in him. When we stop and listen, we can hear the voice of God in him. When we stop and consider, we can find the hidden God in Jesus Christ.

Where someone in deep pain and distress calls out from the end of his or her tether, there is a God who hears and listens. It is the same God that suffered and cried out from His own cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We can cry out to God without taking anything into consideration, we can be utterly reckless and hit the alarm button, alarm the heavens: Where are you? Turn back! You are my God! You are my Father! My Redeemer!

What kind of God is this, that lets us talk to Him like that; who is this God that lets Himself be alarmed by our cries?

It is the God who knows our trouble, our anguish, and our deepest need, more so than we even know ourselves. Because He didn't stay alone with and for Himself in heaven. He came down into the depths of our despair and suffered through everything it means to be human. God does come. He does not remain silent.

And so maybe that's why the church has the season of Advent in the weeks before Christmas. Advent is the time of waiting and hoping in anticipation, for a light of hope, for a song of joy. While he cried out to the heavens, shaking his fist and pleading for God to do something, anything, Isaiah the prophet was asking the people to join him in living their lives in anticipation. He wanted them to scan the darkness while they waited and to look, look hard for a sign ... for any sign ... that God was on the way.

If we pause in the craziness of life as we know it, we might notice that life can be downright dismal at times. Like the prophet Isaiah, we long in the deepest part of our souls to be delivered from this messy lump of nothingness we've created. Isaiah said, "We have been in our sins such a long time ... when shall we be saved?" We do not long for more of the same, for more running around aimlessly, constructing and reconstructing our lives, accumulating things, trying to rebuild things to just as they used to be. But, rather, sitting, waiting, quietly looking for hope, for God to come and tear open the heavens and come down, to wait in the silence and penitence for that one who can save us.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "The Christian faith is a thing of unspeakable joy. But it does not begin with joy, but rather despair. And it is no good trying to reach the joy without first going through the despair."

Look around and inside you. If it hurts too much to look at the darkness in your own life, you have plenty of it in this great big world of ours. If we're honest, we must admit it: nothing can save us from this mess we've created. No government, no relationship, no substance, no acquisition.

Our only hope was what the prophet begged for: "Oh that you would tear open the heavens, that you would come down!"

Today we are invited to hope, to hope that a Saviour is coming, coming to be born in us again. But if we barrel toward Christmas oblivious to the reality of our lives, bolstered by too much eggnog and running on adrenaline after endless hours of shopping sprees, senses overwhelmed by too much sugar and too many jingle bells, well, then we will never really stop long enough to remember how much we do need a Saviour.

We have to pause and wait, in the quiet and darkness, in the hush and stillness ... not rush toward the idyllic manger stuffed with sweet-smelling hay and bathed in the light of a star ... Advent invites us to sit in the darkness with only the flickering light of a candle or two, even for just a little while, to remember ... to remember that we really are in need of a Saviour.

We begin this journey toward Christmas waiting for a sign, just a little sign, that what we see happening all around us and also with us personally is not the final word.

The only thing we can hang onto in the darkness is the hope ... yes, hope ... that God is on his way, ready to be born in us again, to shape the reality in which we live into something promising and beautiful, something full and meaningful.

So, stand up and rise, Isaiah. Stand up and rise, church of God. When sitting in the darkness, notice the little flames of light; wait for the promise you believe will come; hope for the salvation of God for this world and for your own hearts. It's on the way.

Amen.