



Today is the first day of a new church year. The church year is designed to help us remember and rehearse; sometimes in a dramatic way, all the events through which God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit has acted to save and redeem us. It is through the remembering and rehearsing these events the Holy Spirit seeks to empower us to live lives of holiness and so put our faith into action in this new year of God’s grace.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is a four week period of preparation for Christmas. It is a sort of “make-or-break” kind of season, because how well we will be prepared to receive with joy and thanksgiving, the true gift of Christmas, depends on what we do during the four weeks of Advent.

Today we want to take a moment to look at the first reading for today’s Eucharist. (Isaiah 6:4) The prophet Isaiah prays: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”. It is the prayer spoken by a desperate people. It is the sort of prayer spoken by a people who have lost all hope. It is a prayer spoken by a people who are experiencing God’s silence and absence.

Have you ever experienced the silence and absence of God? Have you ever prayed for a loved one to recover from an illness and they didn’t recover? Have you ever prayed for an answer to a question and you never received an answer? Have you ever received an answer to a prayer and it was not the answer that you wanted? In 1997 my father was dying from congestive heart failure. I will never forget him saying to me, “Peter, I’ve prayed and prayed and prayed to God and he has told me that I’m not going to get better.” That’s the silence and absence of God! It’s what St. John of the Cross called, the “dark night of the soul.” “Oh God, tear open the heavens and come down!”

Isaiah had not always experienced the silence and absence of God. When he was a young man; scripture puts it this way, “in the year king Uzziah died” he had an incredible experience of the presence of God. He was praying in the temple. He looked up to heaven and he saw God seated on a throne and the hem of his robe filled the temple. (Now that’s a long hem!) And God was attended by six-winged seraphs. Two wings covered their faces; two wings covered their feet and with two wings they flew. And the seraphs said to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.” Now that is a full-on experience of God’s presence. Nothing was left to the imagination.

When Isaiah was a young man, God’s people had their own land and temple. Then the people fell into sin. They no longer listened to Him. They ignored His presence. And so, God raised up the Babylonian Empire to destroy the nation and the temple, He allowed them to be taken into exile. And the people cried out to God that He would one day restore the nation and the temple.

After seventy long years God heard the cries of his people. And he then raised up the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians destroyed the Babylonian Empire and as part of the peace treaty was to allow God’s people to return to their homeland.

In our first reading, Isaiah is now an old man. He is over seventy years old. He is standing in the ruins of the temple. Remember, the temple itself was a sign of God’s presence. Now it was gone. And Isaiah prays, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

Sometimes we too, feel that we are living in the ruins. We experience the consequences of our sins. We experience the tragedies of life. We experience the tragedies of our world. Today I'm thinking of Ferguson, Missouri. And whatever one thinks about that situation, I think that we can all agree that it is a tragedy upon tragedy. And we cry out, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" and make things right.

And yet the in first reading for today there is not only a cry of desperation. As Isaiah stood in the ruins of the temple, he not only said "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" He also adds, "Yet, O Lord, You are our Father. We are the clay. You are the potter." (Isaiah 6:8) There is that powerful word "yet" which appears at critical moments in the scriptures. Here we are approaching one of the deepest mysteries of faith. It is to accept the fact that *sometimes* God does seem silent and absent.

Atheists see God's silence and absence as a sign that he does not exist. For God's people it's the reverse. The mystery of faith teaches us that even in the deepest and darkest silence and absence of God—He is still there. God's Word teaches us this again and again, as well as the saints and martyrs.

Yes, there are times when God is silent. Sometimes God is silent because he disapproves of what we are doing. Sometimes he is silent because we are asking the wrong questions. Sometimes he is silent because he knows that we will not accept his answer. And so, sometimes God speaks to us through His silence.

On this First Sunday in Advent, we find ourselves in a similar position as Isaiah. Long ago, he stood in ruins of the temple, causing him to think that God was silent and absent. All he had was the promise that God would one day restore the nation and the temple. We also stand in the ruins - of our lives and our world. Also knowing deep down inside ourselves that we cannot fix what is wrong with us or our world, for even when we try to fix things we often create tragedy upon tragedy. In the end, all we have is the promise that one day God will send the Messiah who will bring a new heaven and a new earth.

In his final days of life; in spite of God's silence and absence, my father continued to sing. You see, he was a music teacher. We spent many hours talking together about hymnody. One of his favorite hymns was "Wake, Awake for Night Is Flying." This hymn became more and more important to him as he approached death. "Wake, awake for night is flying, the watchmen on the heights are crying: Awake, Jerusalem, at last. Midnight hears the welcome voices, And at the thrilling cry rejoices: 'Comfort forth, you maidens! Night is past. *The bridegroom comes!* Awake; Your lamps with gladness take!'" Alleluia! Prepare yourselves to meet the Lord, Whose light has stirred the waiting guard. (LBW # 32, v.1) Why did my father like this hymn? He was watching and waiting for the bridegroom.

It is for this bridegroom that we wait and watch for as well during these days of Advent. AMEN.

**+Christo Gloria in Ecclesia +**