

“Divine Intervention Needed” Isa. 64:1-9; Mk. 13:24-27, 32-37 11/30/14

Advent brings us face-to-face with a pair of American virtues that are in tension with one another. First, we have a tremendous admiration for self-sufficiency that goes back to our pioneer days. We love stories about people who raised themselves up by their own bootstraps and became something, who “did it their way,” or who made money the old-fashioned way- “they earned it!”

But this virtue of self-sufficiency is in tension with another American virtue- reverence for God! You see, true reverence for God involves admitting that we are not self-sufficient, that we are utterly dependent on God for every breath we draw, for the food we eat, for the abilities we have, and for our salvation.

Consider the recent events in Ferguson, Mo. As I’ve reflected on them, I have been struck by the fact that we seem to have made so little progress on racial reconciliation. As a country, we’ve been working on this for over 50 years, and certainly things are better than they were. But a sense of distrust between black and white still permeates many communities. Isn’t it amazing how people can look at the exact same set of facts and come to radically different conclusions, depending on the experiences that they bring with them? It appears that we are going to need divine intervention to finally make things right between whites and blacks in this country. And between Hispanics, Asians, and don’t forget,

Native Americans. This problem and many others appear to be intractable issues, for which we need outside help. We aren't self-sufficient! We need divine intervention.

The lectionary, a list of suggested readings for every Sunday of the year, has selected passages for today that highlight our need for divine intervention.

The first passage is from Isa. 64, probably written near the end of the time that the Israelites were being held captive in Babylon (500BC). Listen to the words of the prophet.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,

so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

² *as when fire kindles brushwood*

and the fire causes water to boil—

to make your name known to your adversaries,

so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

³ *When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,*

you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. (Isa. 64:1-3)

Previously, the Israelites had a strong sense of self-sufficiency. They had a great army and centuries of diplomatic experience. They had survived countless conflicts with other nations. But God's people had been humbled by their crushing defeat by the Babylonians, the destruction of their capital city of Jerusalem, along with the great temple of the Lord.

Here in Isaiah, they have a change of heart. They acknowledge their absolute dependence on God and were crying out for him to come down and liberate them (to “tear open the heavens”), as God had done many years ago when they were enslaved in Egypt. And they even recognized that God’s recent abandonment of them was justified.

⁴ *From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.*

⁵ *You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.*

*But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.*

⁶ *We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.*

*We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.*

⁷ *There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;*

*for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. (Isa. 64:4-7)*

God's people had drifted far away from him. Now they are experiencing the bitter consequences of that. For God refused to protect them any longer, and they had been defeated and captured by the most advanced civilization in the world. They are absolutely helpless in the face of such political and military power. The only remaining question: Is there any hope for them?

⁸ *Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.*

⁹ *Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity for ever.*

Now consider, we are all your people. (Isa. 64:8-9)

There is hope. The same God who allowed them to be defeated by Babylon is still their maker, their Father. He is merciful and forgiving. They are still his people. God can still intervene and rescue them.

And that's exactly what happened. Shortly after these words were spoken, the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians, who set the Israelites free, allowed them to return to their homeland of Palestine, and helped them rebuild the Jerusalem. The Israelites had no ability, no hope of securing their liberation on their own. God's intervention was necessary for them. And it came!

Fast-forward 500 years. Jesus was born as a Jew in Palestine. The Israelites had remained in their land all that time. They even had a brand new temple, built by King Herod, yet they lived under brutal foreign domination, this time by the Romans. There were periodic uprisings against the Roman occupiers, which were brutally suppressed. In one case thousands of Israelite rebels were executed by crucifixion on the roads leading in and out of Jerusalem as a warning to any one else who would oppose Roman rule.

Jesus spoke to a discouraged and frustrated Jewish population, much like the one that Isaiah addressed. It was Jesus. His words were poetic and a little difficult to understand. But they sound similar themes. After describing a coming time of great suffering and tribulation, Jesus said,

24 'But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power

and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. (Mark 13:24-

27)

A time of great suffering is coming, Jesus said. But that's not the end. Once again, God will intervene. Jesus states that there will be cosmic signs in the heavens followed by the return of the Son of Man—Jesus himself. He will come with great power and will rescue his followers from those who oppose God's work. God will intervene to save his people and restore justice to the world, just like it was in Isaiah's time.

Our small groups recently finished a book by Phillip Yancey, entitled The Bible Jesus Read, about the Old Testament. One of Yancey's insights about biblical prophecies is that they often have present, near future, and distant future implications, which are often all jumbled together. That seems to be the case here. Shortly after Jesus spoke these words, the Romans, responding to yet another rebellion, laid siege to Jerusalem, causing horrible suffering to its residents. The city was finally leveled, fulfilling the first part of Jesus' prophecy. But the part about signs in the heavens and Jesus' return in glory have not occurred yet. When will those things happen? Jesus addressed that question.

32 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34 It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. 35 Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the

evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.' (Mark 13:32-37)

A common thread throughout the Bible is that we human beings are in need of divine intervention. The enslaved Hebrews in Egypt, the captured Israelites in Babylon, the early followers of Jesus, and us today. Jesus recognized our need for divine intervention, and promised that it is coming. Let's look quickly at what he says about his return.

First of all, Jesus says that no one knows when he will return. Not even Jesus himself! Yet the history of the church is littered with forecasts about his coming. It was predicted to happen shortly after his earthly ministry, then around 1000 A.D., in the mid-1800's, around WWII, in 1988, around 2000 A.D., etc. You can still find many religious shows on TV that attempt to piece together obscure Scripture passages in order to figure out when Jesus is coming. I think it's a waste of time. No one knows, not even Jesus!

Instead of trying to figure out exactly when Jesus will return, Jesus instructs us to simply live our lives as if he is coming soon. He gives the example of a master who entrusts the care of his home to his slaves, telling them he will return someday. They are to keep the house in good order and be ready to welcome him whenever he arrives.

Bear Bryant is widely considered to be one of the greatest college football coaches of all time. He gave an interesting pre-game speech to his 1973 national championship team. Bryant paced in front of his team as the band played for the capacity crowd. He made eye contact with each player as he spoke these words, "In this game, there are going to be four or five plays that will determine the outcome of this contest. Four or five plays that will swing the momentum toward us, or away from us. I don't know which plays these will be. You don't know which plays these will be. All you can do is go out there and give all that you have on each and every play. If you are doing that on one of those crucial plays, and you catch your opponent giving less, that play will swing things in our direction. And if we rise to the occasion like that, on those four or five plays, we are gonna leave here today a winner."

I think that's what Jesus is saying to his followers in this passage. He acknowledges that we need divine intervention desperately and promises us that it will come. But even though we don't know when it will come, we are to do everything we can to make a difference in the world so that we'll be ready when Jesus returns.

And Jesus' return, God's final intervention, is good news, as God will finally right all wrongs and bring justice to our earth. As we begin this Advent season, I ask you, "Are you looking forward to God's intervention, or are you still laboring under the illusion of human self-sufficiency? Are

you ready for Jesus to return, for his second advent?" What can you do to get ready?