

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...”

I'll be honest. It was hard for me to even move past that first line of the Isaiah reading. It resonates so very deeply right now. My spirit seemed to take those words in like a sharp breath, and then breathe them out with a sigh from the depths of my soul....

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...”

It has a pleading tone to it. Almost exasperated.

Show up. God, please, just show up.

“O that you would...”

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There is an odd, nagging sense that we are living in something like Bill Murray's movie, Groundhog Day. At least that's how I've felt.

The only difference is that I haven't been as good as weatherman Phil Connors, Murray's central character, at mastering new skills, such as how to play jazz piano, speak French, sculpt ice, and memorize the life story of almost everyone in town.

The news cycle seems to be on repeat:

Pandemic. Covid. Political discontent. Economic uncertainty. Social tensions.

Pandemic. Covid. Rinse. Repeat.

Almost as bad as Connors waking up every day to “I got you babe” by Sonny and Cher. They say that Connors lived through at least 10 years of Groundhog Days... “I got you babe” every morning for 10 years. Yikes. He resorts to smashing his alarm clock in a variety of creative ways.

And while I have been grateful for new and small ways of finding and cultivating human connection, this still continues to be a time of separation and disconnection, isolation and quarantines. Even as technology allows some solace and creativity with the ability to connect with loved ones, for many, this separation was particularly poignant over Thanksgiving.

Sometimes, it is just hard.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...”

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Over the past weeks and months, I’ve been looking back over my old sermons and writings, as well as reading and listening to podcasts about history and many other topics. It is fascinating. The themes we find in today’s news cycle ripple throughout history, both recent (3, 5, 10 years ago) and more distant (50, 60, 100+ years ago).

The 1918 Flu pandemic, Franklin D Roosevelt and the Great Depression, the Polio epidemic, Joseph McCarthy and Edward Murrow, John F Kennedy (from his summons to service to the Cuban Missile Crisis), the scope of the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr., Lyndon B Johnson and the Civil Rights Act, John Lewis and the Freedom Riders,and these are just a few snapshots in our little corner of the pond.

Caught in the tension between the graces and challenges, humanity is fraught.

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Isaiah finds the people of God in a fraught context. This is the crescendo of an extended communal lament. This is a frustrated people in the midst of exile, loss, and uncertainty. We find the people of God in the midst of great disorientation.

And what we hear is a cry of pain that is seeking out understanding.

It is not a direct correlation for the time and world in which we live, but Isaiah speaks to the common experience of loss, separation, anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. And where is God in the midst of it all?

Isaiah’s plea to God is as simple as it is glaring: **Show up and do something!**

There are days where I want to yell at God: Show up and do something!

(... and maybe I have at one time or another _(ツ)_/ ...)

We WANT God to show up. We WANT God to do something.

I mean, we at least prefer it to be God. Sometimes, though, we loose sight, and maybe, while we would prefer God, we will settle for anyone, someone (insert your favorite political icon or celebrity of choice in the blank here _____).

What are we really clinging to? Does it really help?

“O that you would...”

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This pleading has echoes in Mark’s apocalyptic parable, and in it, Jesus helps to point us in the right direction.

Remember, *apocalypse* means *revealing*. What does this parable reveal about God?

First, on one level, this parable reveals and holds up the endgame message in the ministry of Jesus; that God will ultimately right all wrongs, reconcile all accounts, and redeem all of creation.

Second, and this is crucial: the redemptive work of God is not some future, cataclysmic event. Jesus points to the cross as the revealing of God’s work, nature, and character.

Evening, midnight, cock crown, and dawn – these time stamps in the parable mirror and point to the scenes of the passion that is about to commence, upon which we stand at the threshold. God is revealed in these events: Jesus gathering with his disciples, his betrayal and arrest at midnight, Peter’s denial at cockcrow, and Jesus being sentenced to death at dawn.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...”

The Greek word for *tear* (or *rend*) is: *schizo* (σχίζω).

It appears in the Greek Old Testament (known as the Septuagint) in this line of Isaiah, and connects with two events in Mark: Jesus’ baptism when the Spirit comes down, and the rending of the curtain in the Temple at Jesus’ death.

So, when will God appear? When is the day and hour of the revealing of God? Not at the end of time during some cataclysmic event, but instead, at the cross.

It was an event mocked by the religious authorities and dismissed by spectators and onlookers. Even the disciples missed it.

And yet, it is in Jesus on the cross where God rends the fabric of this world and all that would divide us and separate us from God. And in the heavens being torn, God closes the gap between God and God's people, God's creation, promising to be with us through all things.

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I am reminded of a poem by Christian Wiman: "Every Riven Thing."¹

God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made
sing his being simply by being
the thing it is:
stone and tree and sky,
man who sees and sings and wonders why

God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made,
means a storm of peace.

Think of the atoms inside the stone.
Think of the man who sits alone
trying to will himself into a stillness where

God goes belonging. To every riven thing he's made
there is given one shade
shaped exactly to the thing itself:
under the tree a darker tree;
under the man the only man to see

God goes belonging to every riven thing. He's made
the things that bring him near,
made the mind that makes him go.
A part of what man knows,
apart from what man knows,

God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made.

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Riven means broken, split, torn apart, divided into pieces, shattered, wounded.

We are broken creatures. We are wounded. And the world is riven. Creation is riven, shattered, split and torn.

Here's the thing: God doesn't simply heal brokenness, as if with a magic wand. Instead, God participates in the brokenness of the world. God is present in the midst of the riven things and spaces. It is in participating in the riven, broken and shattered, that God closes the gap. God comes close in that riven space, revealing the very nature and heart of God. This allows for healing that is more powerful and deeply transformative.

God promises to be with us and for us in and through all things.

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Maybe this awareness shifts how we walk through Advent and prepare for the arrival of Jesus.

At the heart of the nativity story is the arrival of the God in our midst in the form of a small and vulnerable baby born to poor and anxious parents. The promise is that God will continue to arrive in our lives in unexpected, vulnerable, mundane, and small ways.

This reverberates into all facets and times of our lives. This is not just about Advent or Christmas. It is the fullness of our lives in the world. Each time we reach out in love, God again and again arrives, invading and upending the kingdoms and systems of this world with God's transformative presence and grace.

What small things can we do in love to reveal God's presence? What small gestures might we offer to proclaim our belief and trust that God is with us...in and through all the graces and challenges of life? Where are the riven spaces and things, the riven people, in which we can sense and be aware of God's presence?

Beware, keep alert, watch, look, and listen. Be aware. Keep awake.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down..."

¹ <https://onbeing.org/poetry/every-riven-thing/>