

## WAITING FOR THE LIGHT *A Distant Hope*

Isaiah 64:1-9

November 30, 2025

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

This is not a polite prayer. This is desperation given public voice. This is a prophet standing in the ruins of everything his people once knew—their temple destroyed, their city emptied, their identity shattered in exile's aftermath. They are back in the land of promise, but that promise rings hollow now.

Isaiah lifts his eyes, and he raises his voice. He does not ask God to gently descend dove-like or send some subtle sign. He begs God: *rip the heavens apart. Come crashing down with so much force that the mountains quake and nations tremble, especially our adversaries. Let them know you are God. O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.* Desperation given voice.

I think of the many souls who have sat across from me—face-to-face, exhausted, hollow, finished with proper praying. I hear their voices. *I've been asking God for years, and nothing has changed. I used to believe faith mattered. What now, pastor?* The prayer of people who have run out of patience with polite piety, people who need more than platitudes about *God works in mysterious ways*. This is faith pushed to its breaking point. This is faith holding on by its fingernails, demanding that God show up—not someday, not in the sweet by and by, not “in his time,” but now.

**And this is where Advent begins.** Not with the dog treat advent calendars we saw at the grocery store—God help us. Not with Starbucks playlists or the warm glow of nostalgia.

Advent starts in the dark. In the waiting that grinds you down. In the gap between promise and reality. My friends, Advent ain't easy. It is work to wait.

Isaiah recalls the rubble. His people, ripped from their homeland, forced to live where their songs sound

foreign and their God had failed them. The temple—the very place where heaven touched earth, the locus and focus of their hope—is in ruins. Everything that anchored their identity, destroyed. They are back at home and yet still somehow lost. What's more: they have stopped trying. They have stopped praying. They have stopped reaching for God. *There is no one who calls on your name*, the prophet says. *No one who attempts to take hold of you.*

And maybe you know what that feels like. Maybe you know what it is to stop praying, to stop reaching, to stop trying, to stop hoping. Maybe you know exile from the life you thought you'd have. Maybe you know exile from the purpose you once pursued, now evaporated. Maybe you know exile from the God you thought you could trust.

This week, my sister, a pre-K teacher in North Carolina, received a text from the mother of a four-year-old student in her class. “Dear teacher, due to recent events, I am afraid to send my son to school. I know you take good care of them, but I am always afraid. I hope you will excuse me. God bless you, teacher.”

Exile. A mother who fears sending her child to school. This is our story. This is the world we have made, the world we have learned to live with. *I am always afraid.* Always afraid. Always. And somewhere, we decided that was acceptable. That a mother's constant fear for her child is just the way things are now. We look away. It's someone else's problem.

*You have hidden your face from us*, Isaiah says. But I wonder if the prophet has it backwards. Maybe we're the ones who have hidden our faces. From her. From what we have become.

What have we become? It's a good question to begin the season of Advent. What have we become? When did we learn to live with this? When did cruelty become

tolerable as long as it doesn't touch us? And have we stopped believing anything will change? Anything *can* change? Anything *should* change?

Have we made our peace with the way things are? Have we called it realism? Have we called it pragmatism? Have we called exile home? Maybe this is why we stop reaching. Isaiah tells the hard truth: *There is no one who calls on your name.* Not just ancient Israel. That's us.

Isaiah prays a desperate prayer. It is heavy with doubt. He dares God to act. *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.*

You see, Isaiah wants divine intervention on a cosmic scale. He wants those mountains to shake and the heavens to split. He wants God roaring into the wreckage to fix what we've broken beyond repair.

And I have prayed that prayer, that aching for God to show up. *Just once, sweep in and make it all right. Rescue the ones who suffer for no reason. Rip the heavens apart and fix this.*

But then Isaiah stops mid-sentence. Suddenly, the tone turns tender. The cry for cosmic correction gives way to intimacy. It happens in a single word in verse 8. Yet. *Yet, you, O Lord, are our Father; you are the potter, and we the clay.*

One verse earlier, Isaiah was demanding that God tear open the sky. Now he claims kinship. *You made us. We belong to you. You belong to us.* In the middle of a hopeless prayer, something significant shifts. Isaiah reaches all the way back to the beginning. He reaches to the God who formed Adam from dust, coming close enough to breathe life into human clay. He remembers. He remembers that this God chooses love over power. Proximity over distance.

Isaiah knew it in his bones. He built his whole life around it. His call to a prophetic career was grounded in this hope. He Preached it, and he prayed it. He proclaimed it, and he declared it. He repeated it over and over again. And Isaiah died waiting for the answer. So did his children. And their children. And their children. For five centuries, this prayer hangs in the air, unanswered. Generation on generation of God's people live in the waiting, passing this prophetic promise on like

one of those family heirlooms no one knows quite what to do with.

*How long, O Lord? they pray. How long, O Lord?*

Advent ain't easy.

Sometimes we must prepare the way for a hope we will never see. Sometimes we are not the ones who get to hold the baby. We are the ones who keep the prayer alive for those who will.

Isaiah holds God to account. *You promised. You promised! You created us. You simply cannot abandon what you made.*

I've heard that prayer. I will never forget it. A mother in tears of anger, hands gripping mine, praying over her son held captive by addiction. She prayed the most honest prayer I have ever heard. "God, you knit him together. God, you know every part of him. Don't you dare give up on him now."

That's Isaiah's prayer. Holding God to God's promise. Perhaps you've prayed that prayer.

Last September, Hurricane Helene hit my parents' home in western North Carolina. We lost contact with them early on a Friday morning. From there, there were no calls, no texts, cell service down everywhere. We followed the news and hoped to hear.

We spent Friday night and Saturday morning doing the only thing we could: praying. Not tidy prayers. These weren't polished prayers. We were praying through clenched teeth, and tight chest, and sweaty palms. We were hanging on by the fingernails of faith. And then Saturday at 10 AM, an unknown number lit up my phone. And I braced for the news.

My mother's voice. My waiting ended with good news. But the truth is, for many it never comes. Those twenty-four hours in the dark. The illusion of control evaporated. I couldn't fix it. I couldn't reach them. I was utterly useless.

*We are the clay.* Dependent. Breakable. Every single one of us can be shattered by one storm, one loss, one unexpected moment. We will all break. The self-sufficient. The proud. The powerful. No one escapes it. We will all break.

And because we are all clay, we are all kin. With tender care, God made that little boy my sister teaches. With tender care, God made his fearful mother. With the same tender care, God made every person who lives in terror and every one of us who has learned to look away. We are all the work of God's hands. And if God will not abandon them, neither can we.

Remember, Advent ain't easy. And this is where hope becomes demanding.

You see, the God who comes at Christmas will not arrive as a conqueror. God comes as one of the vulnerable, one who knows what it means to need help. And if that's where God is—with the afraid, with the displaced, with the ones who must hide in fear—then that's where we must be too.

This week, I trust that there is one person in your life who is waiting, and you know who that person is. Stay with them. Sit with them. Wait with them.

As a church, we must do it together. The families living in fear of a knock at the door. The ones who've worn out their welcome. The ones whose lives hang in the balance. The ones whose problems don't have simple solutions. The world will offer quick fixes, and when they fail, it will walk away in resignation. *Just the way it is.*

But we stay. We do it differently. We sit in the darkness and insist that somehow, someday, light is still coming. We beg God to tear open the heavens and come down. And then we remember we are the work of God's own hands, called to be about the work of God's hands in the world.

This is the ancient call of our faith, what the church does that no organization, no program, no policy can do. Isaiah held that prayer his whole life, and now it's our turn.

Advent demands we stop hiding our faces. *We are all the work of your hand.* And we who follow this God must join that work. We must become a church that looks like Jesus—the refugee, the one in need of protection, the child of God who knew what it meant to need help.

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

Very soon, we will hear the answer to Isaiah's prayer. Very soon, we will see the God whose face is now hidden. Very soon, we will hear the voice of our creator. And it will not come in thunder that shakes mountains. It will come in the cry of an infant.

God's final answer to our desperate prayer is to become desperately dependent on us. A baby, who must be fed, and held, and protected. A vulnerable child whose parents will flee under the cover of night to keep him safe. Yes, the heavens will be torn apart, not from above but from below. Not in power, but in need.

The hope we long for has a name. *Emmanuel.*

The God who holds us comes to be held by us. Amen.