

Tear Open the Heavens

Readings: Isa 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

Scripture:

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
with the mountains quaking before you,
while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for.
(Isa 63:19b; 64:2)

Reflection: I cannot think of Advent without thinking of Alfred Delp, SJ, who in 1944 spent the Advent and Christmas seasons in prison. Delp's writings, letters, and reflections on Advent were smuggled out from prison on scraps of paper by two friends. In one letter, he wrote that he thought it would be a beautiful Christmas. How, you might wonder? Delp was handcuffed night and day and confined to a small cell, facing a death sentence. There would be no moving liturgies, no exquisite manger scenes. But with all the ornaments and romantic imagery stripped away, Delp said he could see clearly the shaking reality of what Christmas promised: God in the flesh, God taking a stand with us against the unimaginable darkness. Christmas, offered Delp, is the chance to celebrate the mystery of the great howling hunger of humankind for God—if we are willing to give over our complacency and pretensions.

In Advent's dark and cold days I am, I confess, often drawn to meditate on the gentle mysteries of a babe wrapped and warm, puffy sheep in the fields and angels in the sky trailing glory. Wondrous stars. Enigmatic strangers from the East. Gold and rare spices. It is the proper and cherished stuff of Christmas pageants. Yet this isn't quite what the people of God asked for through Isaiah. We begged God to tear open the heavens and come down, we pleaded with God to be what we don't dare hope for.

Dare we join with Isaiah and cry out to the heavens this Advent, imploring God to do for us what we cannot bring ourselves to hope for? Might the hungry be fed, might the migrant find safe harbor, might God visit peace on the nations? Shine forth from your cherubim throne, O Lord. Rouse your power and rend the heavens. Come and save us!

Meditation: Delp wrote that to live in the knowledge that the Divine and the human have collided in time requires a willingness to let our romantic notions be burned off, that we might have a clear vision of what is and could be. As Advent lays before us, what do you desire most from God this season, the one thing you dare not hope for?

Prayer: Lord, you loved us enough to tear open the heavens and come to our aid. Rouse your power and come again, show us your face that we might be saved. May we have the patience to wait and the courage to hope.

Reaching to the Ends of the Earth

Readings: Rom 10:9-18; Matt 4:18-22

Scripture:

*Their voice has gone forth to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.* (Rom 10:18b)

Reflection: When I was a young professor it was customary to write to other scientists and ask for a copy of their recent work that you wished to read. Whenever I published a new scientific paper, postcards from all over the world would appear in my mailbox, asking that I send them a copy. Some requests came from places I could not imagine going: from universities in Cuba and the Soviet Union. My words had seemingly gone out to the ends of the earth. Now we can reach the ends of the earth and beyond with a few taps on our phone, our words visible even to astronauts on the International Space Station.

St. Andrew and his fellow apostles were sent out by Jesus to proclaim the good news, to be a voice for the Gospel even to the ends of the earth. But this is not just a job for the apostles and their successors. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis firmly reminds us that we are all, by virtue of our baptism, called to be evangelists, disciples on a mission to all the world. All of us are to raise our voices, living and proclaiming the joy of the Gospel. Do

not think that you need special training or must wait to be invited, Pope Francis advises. We can rely on the grace of the Holy Spirit to guide us as well as the gifts the Spirit brings to us: of wisdom and strength and understanding. We must allow the deep joy that comes with our faith to bubble up in every encounter, whether we are whispering words of encouragement to a friend in distress or tweeting the latest news to the ends of the world. Go forth and proclaim the Good News!

Meditation: Preach the Gospel at all times, use words if necessary, advised St. Francis of Assisi. In what ways is the joy of the good news, that God has come to earth and lives among us, visible in your life? How is God calling you to be an evangelist?

Prayer: You are the Word made flesh, O Lord, that speaks to us of joy and of mercy. Help us proclaim you to all the world, in our every action as in our every word.

Breathing Space

Readings: Isa 11:1-10; Luke 10:21-24

Scripture:

The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him:
a Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
A Spirit of counsel and of strength . . . (Isa 11:2a)

Reflection: Breathe. I say it to students who are anxious about their work. I say it to colleagues who are teetering on the edge of exasperation—or exhaustion. And at this time of year, as the stack of papers to grade grows and end of semester meetings and holiday events start to elbow each other on my calendar like squirming six-year-olds, I find myself murmuring it to myself over and over again. Breathe. Breathe. Remember to breathe.

The Hebrew word *rúah*, often rendered Spirit in this passage from Isaiah, can also mean wind or breath, and I long in these Advent days for a moment's breathing space. I ache for a touch of the Spirit's strength and wise counsel to waft past my office, taking with it the dust of exhaustion and frustration.

In his conference on perfection, the fifth-century monk and theologian St. John Cassian offered a stronger translation of this verse from Isaiah. Rather than say the Spirit comes to rest on the promised Messiah, Cassian reads it as the Spirit

shall fill him. So too for us, suggested Cassian, this breath, this Holy Spirit, is not a shield, but something that so penetrates us that it possesses us entirely. This breath of God fills us so completely that nothing else can disturb us, with a power so overwhelming it cannot be wrested from us.

We are promised that the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon the Messiah, who will be filled with wisdom and understanding. For ourselves, we hope that the breath of God, God's holy wind, will fill us as well. That we might find counsel and strength. That we might be able to breathe.

Meditation: How has the Holy Spirit filled you with wisdom and understanding? What is the Holy Spirit stirring up in you?

Prayer: Grant, O Lord, that we might be entirely possessed by your Holy Spirit. Breathe into us wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength. Stir up in us a passion for your justice, that we might bring peace to birth in our time.

Love's Long Feast

Readings: Isa 25:6-10a; Matt 15:29-37

Scripture:

The Lord God will wipe away
the tears from all faces. (Isa 25:8b)

Reflection: There is such tenderness in the readings for today. I think of my mother, wiping the tears off the faces of my younger brothers, a cool cloth removing the last signs of pain and distress once the immediate damage had been dealt with.

I am struck in today's gospel by Jesus' tender care for those gathered. He is worried that they might faint from hunger if they aren't fed before he sends them on their way. The crowd, filled with those who had been cured and those who loved them enough to bring them before Jesus, might not have cared, thinking temporary hunger unimportant in the face of what had been done for them. But I hear in Jesus' concern God's desire to make us not just whole, but to see that we are replete, utterly enfolded in God's love, brought fully to life.

It is hard to measure the depths of this love God has for us. Isaiah tried, summoning images of a rich feast, with fine wines. The psalmist evokes an overflowing table and aromatic oils. I struggle, as I stand before the altar, God's very

Body and Blood held out to me, to see the full measure of mercy offered not just in some unknown future, but now.

The Talmud speaks of the wine saved since creation to be served to the righteous at the final banquet. But I realize we are offered to drink of what has been saved since creation every day in every glass of water we drink. Most of the atoms in that water came into being a scant second after the birth of the universe, dispersed through the universe to land here, for us. In much the same way, God's tender mercy surrounds us at every moment, we have only to take and drink of what has been prepared for us.

Meditation: Look up into the heavens and out into the immensity of the universe, or deep into a cup of water, where the atoms number more than the stars in our galaxy, and consider God's infinite mercy. What images evoke for you the depth and breadth of God's tender concern for us?

Prayer: From the beginning of time, O Lord, you spread a banquet before us. Enfold us in your mercy, and wipe the tears from our eyes, that we might at last see your face.

Anchored in Trust

Readings: Isa 26:1-6; Matt 7:21, 24-27

Scripture:

“A nation of firm purpose you keep in peace;
in peace, for its trust in you.” (Isa 26:2b-3)

Reflection: I had gone for a walk when the storm was a smudge on the horizon. By the time I reached the end of the path through the dunes to stand on a small spit of sand protruding into the North Sea, the wind had come up in earnest. The sand rippled like silk across the beach, shifting the coastline in front of my eyes. It was an incredible relief to get back to the rocky outcrop that anchored the town and to ground that did not shift under my feet and slither into my shoes.

Still, sand is just rock that has been worn away, that has surrendered to the forces that batter at it. Water and air. Heat and freezing cold. Light. Isaiah reminds us that the facades we have constructed, the refuges we have built with our hands and minds, are no true refuge. They cannot stand against the elemental forces the world hurls at them. All these will crumble in time.

So in what can we take refuge, where is the strong city that Isaiah promises to Judah? In his “Blessing for One Who is Exhausted,” priest and poet John O’Donohue encourages us to take shelter within the warm stone of silence and let its

peace claim us. We ought not to surrender to the winds of this world, to be shaped by whatever blows by. Instead we need to draw close to and take on the shape of what protects us.

It is not what we say nor what we hear, but what we do, says Jesus, that gives us shape, that fashions us into living stones. For we are the foundation of the city of God, called to be open to the just, a shelter for the poor and protection for those in peril from the world. For deep within the silence that has claimed us is God, who has heard our cries for peace and for justice. Our God, who hears the cry of the poor.

Meditation: What in you needs to be ground away so that it can be reshaped by drawing near to God? Where should you set your living stone? What is it supporting in the city of God?

Prayer: Open to us the gates of justice, O Lord. Show us how to become a shining city, a nation of firm purpose, a people of peace.

Five Minutes' Peace

Readings: Isa 29:17-24; Matt 9:27-31

Scripture:

One thing I ask of the LORD;

this I seek:

To dwell in the house of the LORD

all the days of my life. (Ps 27:4a)

Reflection: When my kids were small, we read them a book called *Five Minutes' Peace*. In it, a mother elephant goes from room to room, seeking five minutes of peace. She's longing for a cup of coffee and a look at the paper, unperturbed by her three children. In the end she resigns herself to three minutes and forty-five seconds of quiet. There are days, so many days, in Advent when I find myself equally chased from place to place by the demands of the day. Days where even three minutes and forty-five seconds of peace would be grace.

What is it I long for? Like the psalmist, I yearn to dwell in the house of the Lord, if not for all my days, at least for a few minutes. All too often I give up and let myself be dragged under by the torrents of mad-crazy-busyness that is the end of the year, crying out to the Son of David to have pity on me like the two blind men in today's reading from Matthew's gospel.

I find myself wondering if I walked out of my office today to find Jesus standing in the hallway, asking "Do you believe that I can do this?" what I would say. Do I really believe that if I ask, God will grant me five minutes' peace—or more?

I may have only a fraction of the faith of the two blind men, but perhaps like the tired mother elephant, I can be persistent in my pursuit of peace. If not five minutes, then three. If not today, tomorrow. I can pray for the grace to relentlessly seek God, that I might dwell within his walls, in peace all my days and beyond.

Meditation: In a colorful Advent drawing, Brother Mickey McGrath, OSFS, prayed that God might live in our hearts. Alongside, he suggested finding fifteen minutes each day to sit down with God and perhaps a cup of coffee. Spend the time thinking not of the demands of the day but rather contemplate all for which you are grateful to God.

Prayer: Come to us, O Lord, and clothe us in your peace. Grant that we might dwell with you in tranquility, eased of our daily concerns and healed of our wounds, now and forever.

Christ before Me

Readings: Isa 30:19-21, 23-26; Matt 9:35–10:1, 5a, 6-8

Scripture:

[F]rom behind, a voice shall sound in your ears:

“This is the way; walk in it . . .” (Isa 30:21)

Reflection: No longer shall God be hidden, promises Isaiah. From behind, you will hear the Lord, to your right and to your left, his voice shall rise. I hear echoes in Isaiah of the last few lines of the prayer attributed to St. Patrick: “Christ before me, . . . Christ beneath me, . . . Christ on my right, Christ on my left . . .” Christ with me, always.

There is a famous chemistry problem that asks students to estimate the possibility that the next breath they take contains a molecule of oxygen once exhaled by some historical figure. As it turns out, in every breath we take there is likely to be at least one molecule that Jesus breathed. Oxygen works its way into plants and animals, into the water we drink, and the very stones under our feet. When Christ became incarnate, something of Christ started to find its way into the material universe in a new way. Christ has touched every stone that paves my path and that shelters me from the storms. Christ’s breath stirs in the wind that blows past my face. In every breath I take, in every cell of my being, a bit of Christ’s physical body resides. So, too, is Christ in each

and every person I encounter. There are no unsacred places, said poet Wendell Berry. It’s all sacred, all touched by God who came to earth to redeem us. God made flesh in time becomes God in all things.

It’s a staggering reality. One that in truth I can hardly bear to think about: Christ within me, always.

Meditation: Look around. Where do you see Christ above you? Beneath your feet? Behind and next to you? Can you see Christ in the eyes of your neighbor? Perhaps more importantly, can your neighbor see Christ in your eyes?

Prayer: Christ, you promised to go before us always. Be beneath us, to hold us up. Above us, to remind us of our destiny. Beside us, to remind us that we are never alone.