

Betsey Moe  
Sermon 11.30.08  
“Come Down!”

Isaiah 64

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!  
3When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
4From 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.  
5You 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.  
6We 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.  
7There 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.  
8Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
9Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,  
and do not remember iniquity for ever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.  
10Your holy cities have become a wilderness,  
Zion has become a wilderness,  
Jerusalem a desolation.  
11Our holy and beautiful house,  
where our ancestors praised you,  
has been burned by fire,  
and all our pleasant places have become ruins.  
12After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord?  
Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?

John 6:30-40

30So they said to Jesus, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see [the work of God] and believe you? What work are you performing? 31Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” ’ 32Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ 34They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’

35 Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. 36But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. 37Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; 38for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. 39And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.’

I have a little book called *Children’s Letters to God* that I like to pull out every once in a while to refresh my perspective. It’s a collection of letters that seem to have come from several Sunday School classes. Ginny writes, “Dear God – Please put a-nother holiday between Christmas and Easter. There is nothing good in there now.” Here’s something from Joyce: “Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy.” This is from Lois: “Dear God, I like the Lords prayer best of all. Did you have to write it a lot or did you get it right the first time? I have to write everything I ever write over again.”

Here’s one from a boy named Seymour: “Dear God, How come you did all those miracles in the old days and don’t do any now?” This one is not quite so funny because it is one of those kid questions that adults still ask. In fact, there may be a little Seymour in all of us, wondering why God holds back on the grand, showy, faith-building miracles nowadays. It’s the Seymour in me who watches the news and wonders in cases of child abuse why God didn’t step in. The Seymour in me attends Presbytery meetings and wonders why God doesn’t stop church divisions by speaking through the microphone system– I mean, just once is all we would need. The Seymour in me hears of entire generations being wiped out by AIDS in Africa and wonders why God has not revealed a cure.

There was a little Seymour in the prophet Isaiah when he said, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence, to make your name known to your adversaries....O Lord, will you keep silent?!” (64:1, 12) If ever there was a time in Israel’s history when a divine cameo appearance would have been effective, it would have been this time. It is thought that Isaiah 64 was written in the uncertain period following the exile. God’s people returned to a Jerusalem in ruins to try to put the pieces of their city and of their faith back together. We see a glimpse of this

bleak landscape in the end of Isaiah 64 when the prophet writes, “Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned by fire.” It is one thing to try to rebuild a ruined city, but it’s another thing to rebuild a theology, an understanding of God. Prior to the exile, the people of Israel believed that the presence of God dwelled in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was God’s city, and God *lived* in the temple – so to have the city and the temple destroyed, *burned by fire*, threw the people into a crisis of faith. Where was God? Was God burned in the temple along with everything else? Had God abandoned them? Does God even exist? And just how were they supposed to rebuild and be God’s unique people under foreign leadership? They knew at this point (Isaiah said it!) that their sin had something to do with Jerusalem lying in ruins, but how were they to move forward? Isaiah 64 expressed it all: their sadness, their remorse, their longing for renewal. Of course there was a little Seymour in the people at that time. “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” sounds a lot like, “God, how come you did all those miracles in the old days and don’t do any now?”

Isaiah really was thinking of the *old days*. The “tearing open of the heavens” and the “mountains quaking” that Isaiah referred to actually happened in the time of Moses. Exodus 19 tells of the Israelites standing at the foot of Mount Sinai and God meeting them there in fire and smoke. Listen to this:

“On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled....Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.” (Exodus 19:16, 18-19)

There would have been no denying that God was present at that moment. Everyone for miles around would have known that Yahweh was God.

So when Isaiah says, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at your presence,” he is asking for an encore of the Sinai show. A grand fireworks display which would do so much to reinvigorate the Jews, proving to them that Yahweh was still alive and that Yahweh still cared about them, not to mention leaving no doubt in the minds of the ruling Persians (and all other nations, for that matter) that Yahweh was the rightful God of the universe. A dramatic “coming down” would solve everything.

But would it? If Isaiah were to consider what happened *after* Mount Sinai shook, he would have remembered that the show did not lead to greater faith. In fact, the opposite thing happened. The people standing at the foot of that mountain built themselves a golden calf to worship. The grand fireworks display had no lasting impact on their faith. It would take something different – something that ran deeper than a sign or a miracle – to satisfy the Seymour in them, because that Seymour was longing for something more than mere entertainment, more than mere proof.

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The Seymours in us who grow up and keep asking, “How come you did all those miracles in the old days and don’t do any now?” may be asking about something else that is more difficult to name. Something that we all think deep down but blush to put into words. Something laced with creeping insecurity like, “God, if you’re there, do you love us? Do we matter to you?” We hear this deeper question in Isaiah 64 when the prophet interrupts himself, saying, “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter” (64:8). It is as if Isaiah is saying, “You do still love us, God...right?” What Israel (through Isaiah) was asking for was a miracle, but what they wanted was love. What they were asking for was a tearing open of the heavens, but what they wanted was someone beside them.

And then, in the words of a prayer from Iona, Scotland, “When the world was dark and the city was quiet, God crept in beside us.” God came – not in a tearing open of the heavens but quietly, in an ordinary birth. His voice was not thunder; it was a feeble infant cry probably only heard by Joseph and Mary.

It was too subtle an entrance for the Seymours in the world to notice. In fact, when this baby grew into a man and began doing his work of healing and feeding and teaching, there always seemed to be a few Seymours following him, asking him to do a real miracle like the ones God did in the old days. In the reading today from John, we see Jesus just after he fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. The Seymours around him ask him *after* the feeding, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see [the work of God] and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors (in the old days) ate manna.” Isn’t this something? They seemed to have missed the whole miracle. While they were staring up at the heavens waiting for God to tear them open and send manna down, 5,000 people ate bread from a few ordinary loaves that a kid was carrying. The Seymours were looking for the flashy; God had gone with the subtle.

But even more importantly, standing right in front of these Seymours was their manna – God’s ultimate provision – who, in Jesus’ words, had come down from heaven to satisfy their deepest hungers and thirsts. God, by coming as a person, had “crept in beside them.” And it would be this God beside them, Jesus Christ, not the show-stopping miracles, that *would* finally satisfy the Seymours. God would satisfy the Seymours not by coming in fire and leaving in smoke but by coming in flesh and dying on a cross. In this one final act, God said to the Seymour in all of us: “You are loved.” Now, that’s a miracle.

So, does God not bother with miracles anymore, knowing that they alone will not change us? I don’t think God can stop doing miracles any more than I can stop breathing and still live. God has been doing miracles ever since God spoke the words, “Let there be light.” If we want to see them, though, we may have to open to subtlety, watching for evidence of God “creeping in beside.” To my own Seymour question about the abused child, God might say, “Whenever a child is moved from an abusive home to a safe, loving foster home, you can know that I have been beside that child.” To my Seymour question about church divisions, God might say, “Whenever one Presbyterian listens openly to another and sees the face of Christ in him, I have been in the midst of them.” To my Seymour

question about the AIDS pandemic, God might say, “Whenever a class on HIV/AIDS is held in an African village, I have been right there, sitting on a bench, smiling.” God has always been and always will be engaged with the world, so we will always have signs that “God has been here.”

I’d like to close using the prayer I mentioned before. This is a prayer written in the Iona community – a Christian community marked by renewal and growth in Scotland, a country where Christianity has long been tired. I think an older Seymour or an Isaiah could have written it – someone who would love to see the heavens torn open but who is beginning to understand God’s style of “creeping in beside” and making a life with us... and in us. Let us pray:

When the world was dark  
and the city was quiet,  
you came.

You crept in beside us.

And no one knew.  
Only the few  
who dared to believe  
that God might do something different.

Will you do the same this Christmas, Lord?

Will you come into the darkness of today’s world;  
not the friendly darkness  
as when sleep rescues us from tiredness,  
but the fearful darkness,  
in which people have stopped believing  
that war will end  
or that food will come  
or that a government will change  
or that the Church cares?

Will you come into that darkness  
and do something different  
to save your people from death and despair?

Will you come into the quietness of this town,  
not the friendly quietness  
as when lovers hold hands,  
but the fearful silence when  
the phone has not rung  
the letter has not come,

the friendly voice no longer speaks,  
the doctor's face says it all?

Will you come into that darkness,  
and do something different,  
not to distract, but to embrace your people?

And will you come into the dark corners  
and the quiet places of our lives?

We ask this not because we are guilt-ridden  
or want to be,  
but because the fullness our lives long for  
depends upon us being as open and vulnerable to you  
as you were to us,  
when you came,  
wearing no more than diapers,  
and trusting human hands  
to hold their maker.

Will you come into our lives,  
if we open them to you  
and do something different?

When the world was dark  
and the city was quiet  
you came.

You crept in beside us.

Do the same this Christmas, Lord.  
Do the same this Christmas.

Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From Cloth for the Cradle by John L. Bell (Wild Goose Publications, 1998)