

Advent Hope: When God Hides

Bob Setzer, Jr.
Pastor

Knollwood Baptist Church
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

www.knollwood.org

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Isaiah 64:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:31-37

This week, our campus has been festooned with Christmas decorations and I am grateful. It's impossible not to get the Christmas spirit in so festive a place with its many nativities and Christmas trees, two towering, twinkling Christmas trees, and vivid green wreaths on every door.

This week, I've enjoyed watching our Through the Week School preschoolers take this all in with their awestruck eyes. One preschool parent told me, "My daughter came home from school and told me, 'Christmas came to church!'"

And yet in the world around us, the signs of Christmas are more fleeting. Of course, the usual decorations are up, the seasonal jingles sounding, and the holiday sales coming fast and furious. But sightings of the real Christmas are hard to come by in a world where worshipers are gunned and bombed in their churches and mosques, where Hawaii is preparing for a possible nuclear strike from North Korea, and a three-year-old girl is snatched from her bed in the dead of night and killed.

Yes, Christmas may be coming to church, but there is scant evidence of Christmas coming to the world around us.

Indeed, at this time of year, we may find ourselves crying at the heavens with Isaiah, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” But instead of dramatic revelations of God’s power, we seem confronted by a God in hiding, a God who eludes our grasp and dodges our prayers.

Perhaps there is help in knowing we are not the first to feel such abandonment. In the 6th century BC when Isaiah fired his angry prayer at the heavens, God’s people were wondering when and if their long-promised deliverance would come. Jerusalem’s once mighty temple lay in ruins, while road-weary exiles, returning from a long sojourn in Babylon, hobbled toward an uncertain future.

Or what of shaken first-century believers trying to make sense of a *second* Jerusalem temple razed to the ground. It felt like the end of the world and for some, crushed beneath the chariot wheels of advancing legions, it *was* the end of the world.

No, we are not the first to wonder why God refuses to show up in a decisive way. That is a question God’s people have wrestled with for a long, long time.

Canadian journalist Brian Murphy was talking with his teenage son over breakfast. Mr. Murphy was urging his lackadaisical son to greater efforts in his studies. Reflecting a doomsday scenario, the teenager cynically remarked that grades didn’t matter because everyone would soon be dead anyway.

Bristling, the father shot back, “What makes you so important, that after all these eons of time, and billions of people, you get to be one of the special ones to be here at the end of the world? You may be that special, I suppose, but I would develop a Plan B if I were you.”

Truth be told, the world has endured far darker, more dangerous times than these. And in Mark Chapter 13, Jesus warns his followers that no matter how dark and desperate the times become, there will be no easy exit or great escape. Looks like they, and we, better come up with a Plan B.

Well, part of that Plan B is Advent. Advent is that season of the church year when we are precariously poised between Christ's first coming and his second.

On the one hand, we are confronted by the God who greets us as a babe in a manger, the most fragile expression of divine love imaginable; and yet on the other hand, we sound the promise that someday Christ will come in his fullness to usher in God's kingdom, once and for all.

But for now, we are caught between the two comings, like a camper in the Blue Ridge Mountains on a cold, frosty morning, aching for the dawn. He or she knows the sunrise is coming, but for now, the darkness and the cold are all there is. The Bible calls that darkness and cold the *hiddenness* of God.

Now to hear Isaiah tell it, sometimes the hiddenness of God is of our own making. As he interprets the catastrophe befalling his nation: "We sinned . . . and you hid your face from us." In this case, God is hidden--seemingly withdrawn and absent--because, writes Isaiah in a chilling phrase, "You delivered us into the hands of our iniquity." To be in the hands, in the grip, of our iniquity--instead of in the hands of God--is to forsake God's way for our way. As C.S. Lewis writes in the *Screwtape Letters*, "There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'All right, then, have it your way.'"

And yet, despite the cold, deep darkness that feels like the end, God will not abandon God's people. Instead, Isaiah defiantly prays, as if to remind God of God's parental responsibilities, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand . . . (so) do not remember (our) iniquity forever."

No darkness, not even the self-inflicted kind, is forever, for God is faithful and forgiving. The sun will rise again.

As Corrie ten Boom, a courageous Dutch Christian who survived a Nazi concentration camp, framed her own confession in the dark: "When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away your ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer."

But over in Mark 13, Jesus points to a different kind of divine hiddenness. This is not the hiddenness of God we bring upon ourselves. This is a form of divine hiddenness that is God's good gift. For this hiddenness, this divine withdrawal, is God giving us time, giving us room, to matter. This hiddenness is God refusing to drop the curtain on history so we can have a role in the drama. This hiddenness is God offering us the sacred opportunity to take the mission of Jesus upon ourselves.

Thus, as Jesus' disciples survey the ruin of Jerusalem's once mighty temple and ponder what feels like the end of the world, Jesus doesn't promise a rapture of the faithful. Despite what the *Left Behind* series of books and movies have misled many to believe, Jesus doesn't offer a spiritual ejection seat from the world right before all hell breaks loose. No, he tells the story of a man who goes on a journey and leaves his servants in charge. The door keeper is told to keep an eye out for the master. And when the master returns, he will want to see that each servant has completed the work that was uniquely his or hers to do.

One of those servants with a job to do is a friend of mine, a member of this fellowship. In the wake of the many harrowing revelations of sexual harassment this fall, she wrote her own version of "Me too." Her confession is a poem that recounts how women, sexually harassed or abused, have been shamed and silenced far too long. But now, a rising wave of resistance is putting an end to the old order of tacit acceptance, and birthing, by God's grace, the new order of zero tolerance.

And so with a firm, but trembling hand, she writes: "One day a woman could hold back no longer a torrent of truth breaking forth. This happened to me. Then another woman answered, me too. Then another and another and another with courage and trembling and

sometimes for the first time with whispers and with shouts: me too, me too, me too, me too, me too.

“Strangers became sisters and sisters startled us with all of the stories we never knew . . . Me too. The telling of the story is not the end of the story. But the finding of our words is a fierce beginning indeed.”

Yes, it is a fierce beginning indeed. And the kind of holy, healing work, Jesus left us here to do. As he tells the tale, “It is like someone going on a journey. When he leaves home and puts his servants in charge--each with his, her own work--and commands the doorkeeper to be on watch.”

That’s what we’re doing this Advent, especially this first Sunday of Advent. We’re keeping watch. We’re widening our eyes in hope. We are peering deeply into whatever darkness surrounds us, searching for some flicker of light. We are striving to do what Jesus asked us to do, instead of plotting our escape from the world he left in trust to ordinary mortals like ourselves.

We are putting legs on our prayers and fleshing out our hope by caring for the people he told us to care about, from spending a night at the homeless shelter to helping with Meals on Wheels. We are those strange, crazy folks staking their lives on Jesus’ promise, “Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away.” Yes, whether we find ourselves stranded in a darkness of our making or despairing over the darkness in the world, Jesus is the answer to Isaiah’s prayer this Advent. And our prayer too.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Two times in Mark’s gospel, the heavens are ripped open, just as Isaiah prayed, first at the baptism of Jesus and then at the cross.

The first time the heavens are torn asunder, a dove floats down and lights upon Jesus’ shoulder, symbolizing God’s empowerment for his mission. The second time the heavens are

ripped apart is when Jesus cries from his cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!” as he bears the sins of the world upon his back. So whether you need divine empowerment for your mission, or forgiveness for your failings, Jesus brings both. That’s why he is God’s precious, priceless Christmas gift to the world.

My sister put me on to a moving blog post by a woman who lost her husband and the father of her young children to cancer. This woman had always been a churchgoer, but this devastating loss set her on a quest to find a church that could help her through her paralyzing grief.

She visited churches geared to millennials but found that the gospel for the young and restless set didn’t speak to her need. She visited churches with high-tech coffee bars but found superficial chatter instead of deep connections. She visited contemporary churches where the pastor sat on a couch or roamed the stage during the sermons, but she came up empty.

Desperate and weary, she kept looking. She visited churches with palatial facilities and trendy programs, but nothing touched the deep ache in her heart.

Finally, after a long, exhausting search, she sat down and wrote in her journal, “I need Jesus.” Then, as her tears dotted the page, she wrote again and again, “I need Jesus. I need Jesus. I need Jesus.”

Commenting on the blog post, my sister added, “I hope she found him.”

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

At long last, God answered Isaiah’s prayer, and yours and mine too. For no matter what darkness in which you find yourself, Jesus is God’s light, shining in that darkness. And no darkness can extinguish his fierce, defiant grace.

So yes, today we light the Candle of Hope. Not because the world, or we, are all they ought to be, but because at long last, the heavens were ripped open. And God’s unspeakable gift, even Jesus Christ our Lord, came tumbling out.

O holy Christ, thank you for coming down from the heights of heaven to live where we live, to hurt where we hurt, and to struggle where we struggle. Grant that in whatever darkness we find ourselves, we might find our way to you. And in finding you, find the hope and strength we need. Amen.

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