



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

November 27, 2011, First Sunday of Advent

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Isaiah 64:1–9
Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19
1 Corinthians 1:3–9
Mark 13:24–37

Introduction

The lections from the Hebrew Scriptures begin not on a note of joyous expectation, but in despair and longing for a world shaped by the presence and values of God. Both Isaiah and the psalmist give voice to Israel's existential yearning for a God who once seemed so close but now seems distant and silent. The Gospel and Letter point toward the hope that is ours as sinful believers in Christ (1 Cor. 1:3–9), and to our call to live in the time between Christ's first and second comings in watchful faithfulness (Mark 13:24–37).

Isaiah 64:1–9

This passage begins with a plea for God to rip open the heavens, to come down to earth, and to make God's presence known among the nations (vv. 1–2).

The prophet makes this cry on behalf of the Israelites because they are (a) beleaguered by their enemies (and longing for God's vindication of them) and (b) aware that their own sinfulness that has landed them in this mess. They have broken covenant with God, and have not dealt justly or lived in harmonious community with one another. Consequently, the God who once drew near now seems distant and remote.

As a result, the people are miserable. They know that without God, their lives are not only precarious and vulnerable; they are also devoid of meaning and purpose and goodness. So they draw on their memories of God in the past—God as their creator/potter (v. 8b) and God as their compassionate parent (v. 8a)—as they urge God to intervene in their future.

One of the challenges this text poses for contemporary hearers is that often we do not see ourselves as being sinful and cut off from God. Furthermore, even when we do acknowledge our sinfulness, the focus is often more on personal and individual sins than on the corporate sins of church or community or nation.

In his book *The Road to Daybreak*, Henri Nouwen writes of returning to his homeland of Holland one Christmas season, and marveling that in one short generation the country had changed from being a very pious nation to becoming a very secular one. He writes:



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Many reasons can be given. But it seems to me, from just looking around and meeting and speaking to people, that their captivating prosperity is one of the more obvious reasons. People are just very busy—eating, drinking, and going places. . . . The Dutch have become a distracted people—very good, kind, and good-natured but caught in too much of everything.ⁱ

I suspect the same could be said of many prosperous nations today, including the United States. We are an affluent and self-sufficient people. Our lives are busy and distracted. As a result, many in our culture have lost a deep sense of connection with God and with one another. We are afraid to slow down for fear that all we will find inside is emptiness and a chasm of unfulfilled longing.

Robert Putnam uses the haunting phrase “bowling alone” to describe our culture. In earlier generations, we bowled together in leagues, but now we bowl alone, that is, we live in affluence but in isolation. Bowling alone is a symbol for the loss of responsibility for one another, similar to the loss of responsibility for one another that characterized Isaiah’s day.

The prophet voices the deep yearnings of a people who are “bowling alone,” a people who know that their only hope for individual and communal restoration rests in the God who first formed and fashioned them. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” the prophet cries (v. 1). Israel experienced an answer to this prayer when God came down (so to speak) and liberated the community from exile. The church glimpses an answer to that prayer in the birth of the Incarnate One, the child who in his very being bridges the great chasm between heaven and earth.

ⁱ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 108.