

*O Lord, Come Down*

**Isaiah 64**

John Breon

I once read an interesting story by a woman named Elizabeth Yates:

Once, in a rowboat with a friend and well out from shore, fog closed in on us. The water had a smooth surface, the air was damp and motionless. We should have been able to hear the hollow tinkling of the bell buoys that would have guided us into and through the channel, but in the stillness they were still too. Using the oars hard and making the boat turn clockwise, then counterclockwise, we made ripples and kept making them until the ripples reached the buoys, rocking them so they began to sound. The sound guided us to safe haven. (*Alive Now!* N/D 89, p. 9)

The Christmas story, the Scriptures and songs and sharing and witness that will go on in the next few weeks are like bells in the fog. They signal the way home. They guide us to a manger where “God is with us” as a tiny helpless baby. That baby’s story—through all his life, his death, and resurrection, his return in the Holy Spirit, and his return in glory someday—his story includes us and guides us through and out of the fog. These bells in the fog signal the faithfulness of God who comes in Jesus Christ. They give us hope that we can get home—our true home.

The ancient Jews longed for some word from God, some revelation from God. They were lost in their sin. Their nation had fallen apart because of their rebellion and disobedience to God. Instead of the shining face of God, they saw the smoke of God’s smoldering anger.

And yet they remembered that they were the people of God. They remembered what God had done to make them his people—judgment on Egypt, deliverance through the Red Sea, appearing on Mt. Sinai and making a covenant with them. They remembered that they could call out to God, confess their sins, and return to God. Hopefully, God would hear them and restore them.

In many ways, ancient Israel is a picture of all of us. Having strayed from God, we're lost, coming apart, and unable to find our way back.

But if, like the ancient community of faith, we remember who God is, what God's done, and what God's like, we too can call out to God and be restored.

Studies of the human brain sometimes use images and measure brainwave activity in response to seeing an image. It's almost like an image or experience leaves a "fingerprint" on a person's brain (see *Homiletics*, Dec 02, p. 36).

Could it be that our past experiences of God's faithfulness leave not only brain fingerprints but also imprints on our spirit as well? So much of what the Bible does is to play those scenes before us and get us to respond, to remember. Communion does that for us as well. Gathering together in worship, or worshiping online does it. So does celebrating Advent and Christmas each year. God uses so many things to make an imprint on us so we'll remember and respond.

Sometimes when we remember, we cry out to God. This chapter in Isaiah is really a psalm. In the book of Psalms there are also many times when the community cried out to God because they remembered that only God could save them. Psalm 80 is a good example. Singing in the Jerusalem temple, the people asked God, almost demanded God—to come to them, to save them, to restore them. The refrain of their song expresses their plea. Could this be our prayer as well?

Restore us, O LORD God Almighty;  
make your face shine upon us,  
that we may be saved. (Psalm 80:3, 7, 19)

We may be uncomfortable with the bold way of praying we often find in the Psalms. But someone has said, "It seems God prefers an excess of boldness in prayer to an excess of caution" (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150. Tyndale Old Testament Commentary*).

This boldness is also part of the prayer in Isaiah 64. The prayer really starts in chapter 63, as the prophet recalls what the Lord did for Israel in

earlier days. Then in the middle of the prayer, the prophet asks God to rend the heavens, tear through the sky, burst from the heavens and come down in a mighty display like Israel saw at Mt. Sinai.

Sometimes, when the darkness surrounds us, we might wish that God would burst through in a mighty display of power. I've felt that at times during this pandemic. And sometimes God does burst through in power and might. But often God comes in more subtle ways.

This Isaiah passage is traditionally related to Advent. We may recall Jesus' baptism when heaven was torn open and the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus and God the Father spoke (Mark 1:10-11). We might think of how someday Jesus will tear through the sky. He will appear again in glory and everyone will see him. But when Jesus came the first time as a baby in Bethlehem, he didn't rend the heavens, at least not visibly. He came quietly, normally, almost secretly. But his first coming and what he did then guarantees his return and final victory.

Psalms 80 and this section of Isaiah are community laments. They express the lament, the sorrow, of the people. After calling on God and remembering God's character, Isaiah begins to confess the people's sin and to express sorrow over those sins. His question, "How then can we be saved?" is poignant as he goes on to describe what sin has done to them. "We are all infected and impure with sin. When we proudly display our righteous deeds, we find they are but filthy rags. Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall. And our sins, like the wind, sweep us away" (v. 6, *New Living Translation*). Sin and its consequences are one and the same. God's judgment for sin is to let it run its destructive course.

"Yet" (v. 8). What a great little word! It says that the whole story hasn't been told. "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father." We are yours. You made us. We're the clay and you're the potter. Earlier, Isaiah used that image to show how the people resisted God (45:9). Here, Israel as clay depends on and responds to God as the potter. Israel is fully prepared to trust in the good gifts of the Father God (Walter Bruggeman, *Isaiah. The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible*).

Isaiah's prayer to the Lord, the Father, the Potter is don't hold our sins against us forever. Look upon us because we're your people. That echoes

Psalm 80: "Make your face shine upon us." And that echoes the old priestly blessing:

The LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26)

Bishop Nunn recently shared that lifting up his countenance means that God smiles on us.

Isaiah says that if God would just look on us with favor and let us see the glory of his face, we would be saved. Again, God did that in an unexpected way. God became one of us and the light of the glory of God shines in Christ.

The good news of Jesus answers the questions and longings of ancient Israel. An example is in the apostle Paul's thanksgiving in 1 Corinthians.

The plea for the Lord to look upon us is met by God's grace given in Jesus Christ.

The answer to "How then can we be saved?" is in "grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" and in the reality that in Christ "you have been enriched in every way" and the promise that "he will keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." All this is based on the affirmation, the reality that "God is faithful" (1 Cor 1:3-9).

Paul sums up his theology in a simple greeting: grace and peace to you. For Paul, everything was of grace. Creation, redemption, Christ, salvation, new life—it all comes from God's grace. And the result of receiving grace is peace—wholeness, well-being, integrity.

God's faithfulness is the basis for our confidence. That's what the Old Testament writers based their hope on. God would be true to his own nature and to his word. God would not abandon the people he had created and called for himself. Paul surely had these OT ideas in mind, but his affirmation of God's faithfulness depends on God's more recent work in

Corinth itself when God called these people into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

God's faithfulness in having called and redeemed them now serves as the grounds for Paul's hope of their final salvation at the end.... Paul redirects their focus from themselves to God, who by calling them is responsible for their very existence as a community of faith. (Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians. New International Commentary New Testament*).

Paul also wants the Corinthians to know that they don't already have everything God has to offer. There is still a future glory.

The grace we've received and keep receiving and our present experiences of God's faithfulness give us hope and confidence that God will always be true to his own character. He'll be faithful at the end as well. We can count on the God we've come to know being himself at the end of all things.

As parents, Nancy and I tried to be consistent. When we set boundaries for our kids, we tried to maintain them. Kids test limits. If the limits we set are always in the same place, kids begin to realize that and it becomes part of their character. And that provides security. Children feel safer when parents give that kind of definition to their behavior.

Of course, because we're imperfect parents, we sometimes let down. Maybe we gave in on something. Maybe we changed our mind without a clear reason. We tell our adult children that they can write a book someday about how we messed up.

But God is consistent. God knows how to deal with all kinds of situations and responses. And God is always faithful and loving. That consistent character of God can become part of our character. It's imprinted on our souls. We find security in God's faithfulness. We know God will be true to his nature as he makes it known in Jesus and through the Bible. So we have confidence. We commit ourselves, we take risks, we venture out, we go into the future, we love and obey, trusting that our faithful God will be faithful. And that gives us hope.

People surely need hope today. All around us are people struggling to cope. Every one of us faces that struggle at some point. Some days I'm so tired of COVID. I'm tired of my health problems. I'm tired of injustice and violence and division. Some days it all seems too much. I asked a man one day how he was doing. He said, "Just barely making it." Whatever our loss, whatever our struggle, let's learn from the Bible not to struggle alone. Make it a community lament. Let's help bear each other's burdens.

In the fog and darkness of our suffering, confusion, and sin we can hear signals of grace that lead us through. The Lord comes to us and assures us that we're not alone, that there's more to life than we see at present. Our faithful God gives new life and hope now and gives us confidence that in him we always have a future and a hope.

Let's use Psalm 80 as our prayer. This lament of ancient Israel can still speak to us and for us as God's Spirit uses it.

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock.  
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,  
shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Awaken your might;  
come and save us.

Restore us, O God;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.

How long, Lord God Almighty,  
will your anger smolder  
against the prayers of your people?  
You have fed them with the bread of tears;  
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.  
You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors,  
and our enemies mock us.  
Restore us, God Almighty;

make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.

You transplanted a vine from Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.  
You cleared the ground for it,  
and it took root and filled the land.  
The mountains were covered with its shade,  
the mighty cedars with its branches.  
Its branches reached as far as the Sea,  
its shoots as far as the River.

Why have you broken down its walls  
so that all who pass by pick its grapes?  
Boars from the forest ravage it,  
and insects from the fields feed on it.  
Return to us, God Almighty!  
Look down from heaven and see!  
Watch over this vine,  
the root your right hand has planted,  
the son you have raised up for yourself.

Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire;  
at your rebuke your people perish.  
Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,  
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.  
Then we will not turn away from you;  
revive us, and we will call on your name.

Restore us, Lord God Almighty;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.

Through Jesus Christ, we say, "Yes and Amen!"