

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**“Come Down, Lord”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**1st Sunday of Advent (Year B)
December 3, 2017
Isaiah 64: 1-9, Corinthians 1: 3-9**

Physicists call it the “Big Rip.” The Big Rip is the cosmological hypothesis that matter of the universe is expanding so fast that at some time in the future everything from sub-atomic particles to galaxies will be torn apart. This hypothesis even has a formula that will calculate the time of the end of the universe. The key value (w) in this formula is determined by the ratio of the dark energy pressure and its energy density. In the example calculation used in their paper, the authors use a hypothetical value for that ratio ($w = -1.5$) and their hypothetical calculation is that the time before such a rip in space would occur is approximately 22 billion years from now. Of course, everyone knows the uncertainties in cosmology are still too great to be able to accurately know the value w . So, as is the case most often in our study of the universe, there is much we do not know and may never know.



At first glance, our passage for today might have been written by some early cosmological physicist. “Oh, that the heavens would tear open. . . .” Oh, that there would be a rip in the heavens, a cosmological change in the universe, an event that would rattle us to our core. “Oh, that the heavens would break open

. . . and you (O God) would come down.”

Our passage from Isaiah is a psalm really, a poem, a plea from the people for God’s presence in a dark and difficult time.¹ The Israelites, you see, have finally begun to return to Jerusalem after their long exile in the foreign land of Babylon. The decree of King Cyrus of Persia has opened the door for their return to their homeland. But as with many transitions, their return is not as easy or as

¹ This portion of Isaiah is a part of a larger psalm (63:7-64:12), a poem of lament of the people, a poem in which the prophet Isaiah reminds God who God is.

triumphant as they had hoped it would be. It was hard, in fact, and their enemies still often prevailed.

The poet knows that things are not as they should be. God, who had acted so boldly in the past through Moses for their ancestors, now seemed silent and far away. God's people, left to their own devices, have given into sin and God must be to blame for leaving them alone. The poet laments, "If only the Lord God would look down and see them. If only the Lord God would once again bring zeal, might, and compassion to the people." If only God would come in some radical way, in a way that would grab the attention of their enemies and shake the Israelites themselves out of their sin and complacency. They need something that will show them clearly who God is and who is in charge. Something akin to Moses' theophany on Mount Sinai, where the Lord God would "forcibly, cataclysmically become present in dangerous and overwhelming ways. . . . a visible show of decisive power that [would] impress Israel's enemies and therefore create life space for Israel."² It is time for something BIG - mountains quaking, waters parted, pillars of cloud and fire, awesome deeds of power that will terrify their adversaries and reform their behavior.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Commentary Series, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 233.

“Get down here, now, God!” the poet cries for the people.

What audacity to demand this of God.

Funny, isn't it, the way we make demands, as if we could, of One who has the power to rip open the heavens and come down? But we do. Like those ancient Israelites, we do it all the time. Like the Israelites, we blame God and make demands.

“How can you let this happen, God?” we demand after hearing news of the latest tragedy.

“Where were you when I needed you?” we cry after emerging from the long dark nights of the soul.

“Why have you hidden yourself away and made me rely upon myself?”

“Fix it, God! Why does there have to be suffering in the world, in my community, in my life? Fix it now!”

“Why don't you tear open the heavens and come down? We need you down here! We can do it by ourselves. We need you.”

“We are, after all, your children. You are, after all, our Parent, our Potter, the one who forms us and makes us. Can’t you come and make it right?” we ask, we beg, we lament. We, like the ancient Israelites, know deep down who God is for us, know that God is the only one who can form us, and reform us, and forgive us. God is the only one who can give us hope. Why else would we ask for God to tear open the Heavens and come down? We know why. We’ve just not been acting like we know.

Today we enter the season of Advent. It’s a season of penitential purple and candles, and minor-key hymns, and self-reflection, and preparation and prayer. It’s a season in vast contrast to the world around us, which during December is festive, decorated, happy, singing, dancing, eating, drinking, smiling, laughing, lights and colors and sounds and Christmas trees and fa la la la la la la la la.

All throughout the week we live there, in that fa la la world, and then once a week we come here and we remember who we are and whose we are and we call upon the God who gives us hope in our hidden despairs.

During our celebration of Advent we remember that in that dark night of the soul, we cannot count on wrapping paper and candy to cheer us up, but God is with us.

We remember that as the coffin is lowered, no amount of festive music and holiday spirit will take away the hole in our hearts, but God will give us peace.

We remember that as we reflect upon our failures, our aches, and our regrets, we will not find ultimate comfort and forgiveness in drinks and lights and parties. But God is with us and will form and shape us into something forgiven, beautiful, and new.

Advent is when we cry “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down! We need you desperately!”

Advent is also the season when we remember that God already has come down. God already is *with us*. And God will still yet come again to fulfill God’s promises. Advent is where we stand in the in-between, the “*already-not-yet*.” Have you heard of that before? The already-not yet? Advent is a celebration of the *already*, when we remember and claim the promise and power of the Incarnation, God with us, the moment when God became human in Jesus, took on flesh, and walked among us. Advent is also the *not yet*, when we hope for the

fulfillment of the promises of God - when Jesus will come again and the Kingdom of God will be here. On earth. When the heavens will be torn open and God *will* come down.

In the *already*, at Jesus' birth, writes Madeleine L'Engle:

. . . all the stars held their breath, . . .the galaxies paused in their dance for a fraction of a second, . . . and the universe started to breathe again, and the ancient harmonies resumed their song, and the angels clapped their hands for joy.³

In the *not-yet* there will be a similar moment - no one knows when, and no one knows how, not even the physicists and their formulaic predictions –when all the stars will hold their breath, when the galaxies will pause in their dance for a fraction of a second and the universe will open. In that moment God will come down and God's reign will be established for all time and for all people and all will be well. All will be well.

In Advent, we live between the *already-not yet* promises of God.

³ *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 80.

This is *not* an easy place to live. In this holding place, this waiting space, there are many unanswered questions, many things we don't understand, and too much pain that we want healed. Not tomorrow. Now.

But the promise of the incarnation is that we are not alone and that God will come again. Like clay in the hands of the potter, we rest in the hands of God and await our full formation as God's people in God's kingdom of light and love.

Advent begins in the dark, with people who are longing for light, longing for peace, longing for hope, longing for God. Advent leaves us with the unshakeable, unbreakable promise that God has come in the infant Christ and that Christ will come again, justice will prevail, evil will be destroyed, and peace shall reign forever and ever.

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

So be it.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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