

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Isaiah 64:1-6

The King of Glory Is Coming for His Weary People

Have you ever been to the point the Isaiah was at in our first lesson? You're ready just to be done with it all. You know the Lord expects better, that He expects you to joyfully work righteousness and remember Him in your ways. You know He deserves nothing less than clean hands and pure heart. And you know, having learned the hard way, that you cannot give it to Him. You're sick of struggling, of doubting, of waking up just to have each fresh start turn into the same old tired rerun. The worst is the nights you can't sleep, when you are left all alone to consider what you've done with your life, with your opportunities, with your relationships, with Him, and the best you can come up with is filthy rags, a fading leaf, a passing wind. Add to it, perhaps, the lack of support of friends and neighbors and you've got quite the recipe for frustration, you've got Isaiah.

Isaiah says we fade like a leaf. The word for fade in the Hebrew is the root of the word for carcass. At our best, we can produce only withering things that devolve and spoil, rust and fade, break and biodegrade. Even our new life—our children—dies. Isaiah calls even our best works filthy rags, polluted garments. Polluted how? Jesus says:

"Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" ... "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

In English, we have the expression, "You are what you eat." That may be true in certain aspects, but Jesus says, "*You are what you produce, what you think, say, and do.*" Isaiah sums it up, "*We have all become like one who is unclean.*" And if we are honest, we know that "all" means all; it includes us. But lest we doubt we are included, Isaiah assures us, "*There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you.*" Jesus says in our Holy Gospel, "*Stay awake,*" not, "*Wake up.*" Why? *Because there is no one who rouses himself to take hold of the Lord.*

Isn't it frustrating? You're going to be more faithful, more caring, giving, and accessible to your loved ones, more diligent in prayer and study. You are going to seek God and grab hold of Him. But then the bad news comes. You can't rouse yourself; you keep nodding off. Your best efforts fail. You miss a week of worship and suddenly it gets a whole lot easier to miss the next week, the next month, the next year. You try your best to be more caring, but someone pushes that one button you hate to have pushed. You try to be more giving, but then that new doohickey comes out or that activity that you love beckons. You try to be more accessible, but work really saps you or other worries beat you down to where you just want to be left alone. You try to be more diligent in prayer and study, but it sure is easy to fall asleep at night and too hard to wake up earlier in the morning. "*There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you.*"

Why not just throw in the towel? That's how we can start to feel. We think, "*Come, Lord Jesus, Come,*" not necessarily because we are prepared to stand before Him in the Judgment on the basis of our works, but because we are sick and tired of the battle, weary from combating our sinful flesh and a world full of temptations. This is the point Isaiah arrived at in our text, worn out from sleepless nights and disgusted with fruitless promises to God. He knew God deserved and accepted nothing less than clean hands and pure hearts. He had no option left but to surrender to God, to throw Israel at His feet, to tell Him to come and give them what He willed, in the hope that God willed to give them mercy. "*Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil!*"

Isaiah was overwhelmed by Israel's backsliding. He threw up His hands in frustration, despaired of himself, and abandoned Himself to God's judgment. He surrendered His plight to the Lord, pleading for mercy: "*But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.*" He pleads the first article of the Creed. "Lord, you have made us. Preserve us. Rescue us. Father, treat us as your children and mold us in your image." And Israel sings with Him in our Psalm [24], longing for the coming of the One with clean hands and a pure heart, who would give them clean hands and pure hearts: "*Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle! Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory!*"

And that is what Advent is about this and every year. It is about the King of Glory coming. It is about waiting for Him who will rescue us from despair and deliver us into peace with God and peace of conscience. Isaiah says, "*From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.*" The King of Glory has been since creation and will until the Last Day be the coming King. He came on Christmas to take our flesh to take our place under the law and His Father's wrath. He comes through the gospel, whenever it is preached or administered, calming consciences crushed by continuous struggle with the sinful flesh, granting grace to grateful hearts, and moving us to offer Him what we could not give Him before: clean hands and a pure hearts, the joyful working of righteousness and the remembrance of Him in our ways. And He will come again to judge the living and the dead. The King of Glory Comes! The King mighty in battle on the cross, strong to save through the gospel! Awakened through a living faith in His first coming, *stay awake* until He comes again. Open your eyes to perceive and your ears to hear. Lift up your hearts and open your minds to Him. It's Advent. Wait and hope, for our Hope will come for His children. Let Isaiah's prayer in the verse following our text be our continual prayer this Advent season of repentance: "*Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people.*" St. Paul promises, "*God is faithful.*" God is faithful, even though we are not. The King is coming for His weary people. *Come, Lord Jesus, Come! Amen.*