

# First Sunday in Advent

**OH, HEAVENS!**

**Isaiah 64:1-11**

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**Analysis by Lori A. Cornell**

*0 that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence –  
2as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil –  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!  
3When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
4From ages past no one has heard,  
no ear has perceived,  
no eye has seen any God besides you,  
who works for those who wait for him.  
5You meet those who gladly do right,  
those who remember you in your ways.  
But you were angry, and we sinned;  
because you hid yourself we transgressed.  
6We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
7There is no one who calls on your name,  
or attempts to take hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.  
8Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;*

*we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
9Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,  
and do not remember iniquity forever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Living under the Pall**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Tired Expectations***

The longing expressed in these verses of Isaiah is shockingly intimate! The prophet cries out on Israel's behalf for their God to intervene as only God has been able to do in the past (v. 1, 4). The people remember how God has acted in history: igniting fear in the nation's adversaries, shaking mountains (vv. 2-3), doing unexpected and marvelous deeds (v. 3) for the benefit of God's people.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Same Old Relationship***

But lurking beneath these words is the people's pitiful fear: that God has no intention to act in this way for his people again. So the people actually call out and wait in vain. After all, Israel hardly deserves God's attention anymore; God might have been happy to meet them if they could have done something right (v. 5). But no matter what God desires, no matter how invested God has been in the people's welfare, the people keep tripping up (like a runner who stumbles under his coach's watchful eye). In fact, at this point in Israel's life, the people have surrendered any self-confidence (v. 6, "all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth"), and abandoned the idea of trying to please God, let alone approach him (v. 7).

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Too Close for Comfort***

Was it the glaring nature of Israel's sin or God's own intimate watchfulness that made the Israelites abandon hope of winning back God? Or had history taught them that they simply could not take hold of God (v. 7)? "You have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity," they say, recalling the past. The God whom Israel begs to "not be exceedingly angry" (v. 9), is being sorely tested by his people again. Exceedingly angry? Hidden? Either way God is unapproachable.

## **PROGNOSIS: Open Heavens**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Unexpected (and Gracious) Deeds***

No wonder God's awesome deed at Bethlehem went unnoticed by so many: God tearing open the heavens and coming down to his people in the form of a child was not only unexpected, it was inexplicable. The people might not have been surprised by shaking mountains and flattened adversaries, but who among them would have thought to look for God in such fragile, everyday flesh? But in Jesus' birth the heavens had been torn open and God had come down (v. 1). And it wouldn't be the last time in Jesus' life that God's unexpected and awesome deeds would show up; in fact, the heavens would open at his baptism and transfiguration; but more importantly, the earth would shake as Jesus breathed his last breath on the cross and the temple curtain was torn in two (Matt. 27:51; cf Mark 15:38). That torn curtain was a frighteningly- and wondrously-clear sign to God's people: Just like the heavens being torn open, Jesus death had collapsed the distance between heaven and earth. In Jesus, God was forgetting his people's iniquity forever (v. 9).

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Brand New***

### *Relationship*

Such an earth-shaking act as God's forgiveness being delivered in his earth-born, mortally-wounded Son is more than awesome, it is faith-making. It makes the kind of faith that looks to God—not as the One who rewards the righteous, but as the One who makes his children righteous. For, if the barrier between heaven and earth has been removed in Christ, then God's righteousness comes pouring out of heaven through Jesus. And, conversely, human sin can be offered up to heaven. Which means that humans who have felt distant from God, can now call God Father (v. 8), and claim themselves as God's people (v. 9)

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *Expecting New Things*

Suddenly, life with God is no longer about living up to God's expectations; now it's about living expectantly—keeping alert to all the ways that God will meet us in Jesus, the Christ. We are like clay, waiting to be shaped by the Potter (v. 8); we don't know exactly what God plans to shape us into, but we know that whatever shape we take we will be vessels for his mercy—opened heavenward, made to pour ourselves into the world.