

## The Hidden Face of God Isaiah 64:1-9

How many of you have ever wanted God to do something big? Have you ever prayed a prayer asking God to do something really big? When I was in school and it was time for finals or approaching a deadline for a big paper or project I used to pray, "Lord, now would be a really good time for you to come back. If you would only come back now and spare me this agony." We've all prayed prayers asking God to do big things before, some much more serious than my example. There are times in our lives that we would just love to see God move in a big and exciting way. In fact we are seeing God move in mighty ways in answering our prayers as we move forward in purchasing this building across the street. But other times, we pray and it seems God doesn't do much. Sometimes God is actually answering our prayers but we don't recognize it. Or sometimes the answer isn't what we were expecting or hoping for.

In this passage in Isaiah, the prophet is praying. And in verse 1 his prayer sounds much like my pre-final prayers sounded. "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down; that the mountains would tremble before you!" Don't just come down God, but make a big show of it! Let it be such an event that there is no mistaking that it is you. Make an entrance God! Isaiah wants God to make such a display of His power that his enemies will shake with fear. In verse 2 he's saying, "Make your enemies quake before you the way water quakes when it boils." Come down and strike fear and awe into the hearts of all the nations. Isaiah is praying for earth shattering things. He wants God to appear in such a way that all the powers that be will tremble in fear before God, acknowledging that God alone is almighty.

In verse 3 Isaiah reminds God that He has done this type of thing before. In Exodus 19 God came down and appeared on Mt. Sinai and the mountain quaked and smoked. He wants God to come again to His people in such a way that all will acknowledge the sovereignty of Almighty God.

But God acts in ways that are unexpected as Isaiah acknowledges in verse 3. "For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came

down, and the mountains trembled before you.” Back in Exodus, the people weren’t expecting such a display from God but they got it. Now Isaiah would like God to do something like this again. But God doesn’t always do the same thing twice. We are now starting our Advent celebration and this is a time of waiting for the arrival of the Christ child on Christmas. It is a time of anticipation and during this time we remember the centuries of waiting that God’s people endured until the birth of Christ. We remember that for centuries God’s plan was hidden like a Christmas present all wrapped up. There were prophecies of the Messiah and there were things in the Old Testament that pointed to Christ, but the fullness of God’s plan was not revealed until Jesus came. I Peter 1:20 says “He (Jesus) was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.” Here in Isaiah’s prayer is a cry for the Messiah to come. “O that you would come down and shake up the power structures of the earth and bring things under your rule, that the nations would fear you.” This is the gist of what Isaiah is asking God to do. And God answered this prayer when Jesus came, and continues to answer this prayer as more and more people come into a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus and live under God’s rule.

When Jesus was born it did shake things up. Word reached old King Herod and he was afraid of losing his throne and sought to kill the baby Jesus. When Jesus was born the heavens were torn apart in the sense that the separation between the physical and spiritual realms was breached and angels appeared to the shepherds announcing peace. The separation between God and humanity continues to be breached as the kingdom of God continues to break into the world bringing peace and wholeness to all who call on the name of the Lord. God has answered this prayer, not by tearing apart the heavens and coming down in fire and smoke and earthquakes, but in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In verse 4 Isaiah speaks of the uniqueness of God. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides the God of Israel who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. He comes to the help of those who gladly do right and who remember His ways. God can be counted

on to take care of His people, to help them, to intervene for them. The gods of the other nations cannot be counted on. They are self-seeking, unconcerned, gods to be appeased and feared, not gods to be counted on, not gods who call a nation their own and make a covenant with them, not gods who will make promises and keep them. There is no god like our God.

There is no god except our God who has become human, lived among us, suffered and died as we all do and who has been raised from death to life and has promised us eternal life. No other god has bridged the gap between humanity and the divine. Paul writes to the Philippians of Jesus saying, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Jesus has bridged the gap between God and humanity by being completely God and becoming completely human as well. He is God with us.

To Isaiah and his people there was no power, no force, no god like Yahweh. He alone is the one true God. Today, there is still no power greater than our God. There is no fear, no problem, no force, no nation, no ruler, greater than our God. He still comes to the help of those who remember His ways. Think about it. What's a time that God has come to your aid? When and how has He helped you?

We just celebrated Thanksgiving and in thinking of what I'm thankful for I could see the hand of God coming to my aid. He's given me a family, a job, good health, a healthy mind, and brought me into relationship with Himself. When we were eating thanksgiving dinner, Vandy mentioned to Bethannie that he needed her to help him for about an hour the next day with some of his book business stuff. She wasn't too happy and was grumbling about what did she have to be

thankful for then if she had to work. I jokingly said, “You can be thankful you’ve got a job in these tough economic times.” But that is a picture of God. Our Father is at work in this world and He provides us with opportunities to work with Him in building His kingdom just as Bethannie’s father provides her with opportunities to work with him in building his business. What other god is a father to his people? Our God comes to the help of those who gladly do right and who remember His ways. It may seem like He’s taking a long time about it, but God does come to our aid.

Now we are at the middle of verse 5 and we see that Isaiah shifts his prayer at this point. In the middle of verse 5, he says, “But when we continued to sin against your ways, you were angry. How then can we be saved?” Isaiah has shifted his focus to the people. He remembers that the people have continued to sin against God’s ways and God is angry with them. Much of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah has to do with God pronouncing judgment because the people have sinned against Him. Now in this prayer, Isaiah doesn’t try to cover that up, but addresses it head on. God is angry because the people continued to sin against His ways. How can they be saved? They have broken the covenant time after time by worshiping other gods and not keeping God’s laws. They had no legal foot to stand on before God. They couldn’t claim there had been a mistake. They couldn’t go through an appeals process to make things right.

In verses 6 and 7 Isaiah vividly describes the state of his people. All of them have become like one who is unclean and all their righteous acts are like filthy rags. There is no spiritual life or vitality in them. They are like dried autumn leaves and their sins are like the wind sweeping them away. A leaf can’t control where the wind takes it. The people are swept up in sin and can’t do anything to save themselves. They are indifferent to the Lord. They don’t call on his name or seek to lay hold of him. God has hidden His face from His people because of their sins and they are wasting away. You see God is the source of all life. Without Him, we shrivel up like dry autumn leaves that are raked up and burned. Our lives are a waste without God in them. There is no real life apart from Him. John writes in I John 5:11-12, “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his

Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” Isaiah’s people had no real life because God had hidden his face from them and they were separated from the source of true life because of their continuing sin. What can they do?

This is the cry from the Old Testament. How then can we be saved? We know from the New Testament that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Jesus said in John 3:16 that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Isaiah didn’t have the sayings of Jesus to quote so he goes back to the covenant relationship God has with Israel in verse 8, the covenant that was established when God first came down in fire and smoke and earthquakes on Mt. Sinai. He says “O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hands.” God has already answered Isaiah’s prayer, not by tearing open the heavens and coming down again, but it was answered when He came down the first time and established His covenant with Israel. God is a covenant-keeping God. He is Father and because of this relationship, Isaiah can pray for his people. He reminds God that these are all His people, the work of His hands. In verse 9 Isaiah prays, “Do not be angry beyond measure O Lord, do not remember our sins forever. Oh look upon us we pray for we are all your people.” When God looks upon His people again, they will turn to Him, their source of life.

In the Old Testament, God worked through other nations to judge His people and bring them to the point where they would cry out to Him and seek Him and renew their covenant vows. Even as Isaiah realizes the deep sin of the nation, He remembers that God has already provided for the answer to his prayer through the covenant. The people are God’s people and Isaiah can pray that God forgive them because God is their Father, their maker and they are His people. The good news of the New Testament is that all people can live in covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is written in 1 Peter 2:9-10 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of

darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” As we enter this advent season, anticipating the arrival of the Christ, we can celebrate that He is even now among us. We have been forgiven and been given eternal life beginning right now. We are the people of God.

Isaiah continues in this chapter to pray and in chapter 65 God speaks in response to the prayer. He speaks against those who continue in sin but promises not to completely destroy His people. Those who continue to break the covenant will be destined for destruction but those who turn to the Lord will find mercy and great blessing. God will not forget His promises but will take care of His people and in this chapter God promises to create new heavens and a new earth and His people will enjoy peace and wholeness. We are still waiting for the fulfillment of this promise. But we have received the promise of new life in Jesus Christ and we celebrate that today.

As the worship team comes forward I want us to take the time to prepare ourselves to celebrate communion. This is one thing we do as the people of God that has come down to us straight from the Lord Jesus himself. He began the communion celebration the night before he died. It is something the Church has continued to celebrate in remembrance of Jesus’ death and resurrection and to remind us that He is coming again. Communion is a rite that only the Church celebrates. If you are visiting with us today and you are living in right relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ you are welcome to celebrate with us. Paul writes in I Corinthians 11 that we are to examine ourselves before eating and drinking to prepare ourselves and not take the Lord’s supper in an unworthy manner, meaning we are to examine our consciences and make sure our relationships with God and others are right. I want to read a prayer of confession and invite you to pray silently as I read. Let’s pray.

We confess our sin to you, God Almighty, because you alone can offer the forgiveness that will set our lives aright again. We have failed to be the holy people you have called us to be; yet we want to be part of your covenant community. May we receive the forgiveness you offer us in Christ. Let us take

this forgiveness and extend it to our sisters and brothers who need forgiveness from us. Remind us once again that we are a community of faith; may we forgive others as you have first forgiven us. We pray for forgiveness in the commanding and blessed name of Jesus Christ. Amen.