

December 4, 2011

Isaiah 64:1-9 "When God Comes Down"

<sup>1</sup> Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains might quake at your presence —  
<sup>2</sup> as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
and that the nations might tremble at your presence!  
<sup>3</sup> When you did awesome things that we did not look for,  
you came down,  
the mountains quaked at your presence.  
<sup>4</sup> 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.  
<sup>5</sup> You meet him who joyfully works righteousness,  
those who remember you in your ways.  
Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;  
in our sins we have been a long time,  
and shall we be saved?  
<sup>6</sup> We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
<sup>7</sup> There is no one who calls upon your name,  
who rouses himself to take hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.  
<sup>8</sup> 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.  
<sup>9</sup> Be not so terribly angry, O Lord,  
and remember not iniquity forever.  
Behold, please look, we are all your people. (ESV)

- God Comes to The *Real* World
- A Real God Must Come to a Real World with Anger
- God's Anger is his Love
- God comes to remake the world and show us his face

The Methodist theologian, William Willimon, preacher and professor at Duke University, tells the story of a friend of his who was asked to preach one Sunday in the church of one of those famous, American preachers whom millions watch every week on TV. On this man's way to the church, after being picked up at the airport, he received these instructions from the driver/elder of the church: "People worship with us in order to feel good about themselves. Therefore, don't mention the cross in your sermon. And don't dwell too much on sin."

I have to say, there has been a little man in my head who keeps telling me, "Hey, this is Advent! This is the time of waiting and expectation. The time of preparing to hear the story of the birth of Jesus. The time of looking toward when Christ will come again. So let's keep it *light*. This is the time of year that is hard and hectic enough as it is, so let's help people feel good about themselves! And you know... what does the cross and sin have to do with the birth of Jesus and the Christmas Spirit anyway?"

In other words, this is the time of year when Christianity gets to be its fairytale-best. And in spite of all the culture-war stuff about "Happy Holidays" vs. "Merry Christmas," really, the culture largely plays along with the hope that everything will be perfect at this time of year. I was in a department store – I think this was the day after Halloween(!) – and they were playing that Andy Williams Christmas song,

*It's the most wonderful time of the year  
with the kids jingle-belling and everyone telling you'll be of good cheer  
it's the most wonderful time of the year*

*it's the most wonderful time of the year  
there'll be much mistletoing  
and hearts will be glowing  
when loved ones are near  
it's the most wonderful time of the year*

You see, everyone wants their Christmas, or the season to feel extra special, perfect, or even magical.

But this passage – this passage in Isaiah – tells us that the reason for Christmas is a whole lot darker. **In fact, if you want to know what Christmas is about, you can't get to the hope, you can't get to the blessing, you can't get to the good cheer, even... unless you see how utterly dark, unpalatable and challenging the bible is about the human condition. Into a dark world will "come a great light."**

This is everywhere in the bible. If you want to ignore the prophet Isaiah for a moment, think about the way the *gospels* depict the birth of Jesus. In Luke's gospel, there are the angels singing from the heavens, and they even come to visit the shepherds. And every time an angel speaks, the angel begins with this admonition, "Be not afraid."

Why? Because people inherently know that the coming of Christ – God's holiness experienced up close and personal – is something that *will create* fear in the heart. The Gospel of Matthew adds the wise men who come at that first Christmas, but as soon as the gifts are delivered, what happens? Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus must flee to Egypt to escape the murderous wrath of King Herod. You see, where there is goodness and holiness, evil and conflict will rise up. Evil wants to put goodness to death.

Think about our world. We've got war in Afghanistan. The Middle East is in continual upheaval. People are "occupying" many of our cities in anger. The political world is in gridlock in the United States. Elsewhere, around the world, there are whole countries near insolvency. Even now, at Christmas, there was a Black Friday story of someone pepper-spraying dozens of people so that she could get the item she wanted; or robbers laying in wait in the early hours of the morning to rob people of the items they had just purchased.

We may want to retreat from the events of this world to some idyllic vision of Jesus in the manger, but the God who comes in Christ comes to engage with the *real* world. He comes precisely because the world is not idyllic. The God who comes in Christ comes down to save the world *we know*, and to save *us*.

But there is a tension here. A terrible tension. Because what would God do if he came, at this moment, to the reality of this world?

Throughout the book of Isaiah, the prophet foretells of a coming day of destruction, when the proud and terrible armies of Babylon would breach the walls of Jerusalem. Babylon would then take the people captive, destroy the temple – the dwelling place of God – and God's people would be no more. And ultimately, Israel *is* decimated. The nation was forced into exile. Jerusalem would be sacked, many were forced into captivity, and their infants (we learn in Psalm 137), would have their heads dashed across the rocks.

Not good, at least by Israelite standards. The cry, then, was "Why does God let such things happen? Why does He let His own house be destroyed?" Or more personally, "Will you restrain yourself at these things, O Lord? Will you keep silent, and allow us to be afflicted like this?" So here in chapter 64, Isaiah pleads for the kind of earth-shaking judgment that God used when he came down the mountain at Sinai. Isaiah thought, "Hey, these nations, certainly the Babylonian bad guys, would tremble in fear if you showed yourself, God." He longs for the old days when God flexed His divine muscle to save His people. "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence...!" Bring it on, Lord! Tear open the heavens and get on your horse and ride! Show our enemies who's in charge. Take charge, Lord! Do your thing!

Sounds like a solid program, doesn't it? Get the Lord to take charge of things, and He'll set this world straight. And this takes us to our second point. Because the real world that God is being called to, to set straight, is a sinful, fallen world, and that includes us.

- A Real God Comes to this Real World with Anger

If God *does* indeed come, to the fallen reality of this world, what will he find? That it isn't just the Babylonians that are the problem! Verses 4 and 5 tell you what God loves. Like any lover, God loves someone who *waits* for him. Faithful dependence. He loves *godly* behavior that comes from a joyful heart. "You (Lord), you meet, you come to the one who joyfully works righteousness – who does good." He loves the pursuit of holiness.

But verse 5, 6 and 7 illustrate that the people of God – the people he's come to save! – they are nowhere near the kind of people that God loves: "You're angry because we sin. In our sins we have been a long time.... So, *will* we be saved *if* you come? In other words, when we ask God to make things right, we better be careful of what we're asking for because that means setting *us* right. If God really did come down and lay waste to evil Babylon, well, he's going to have to lay waste to evil Israel, too. He has to. Because He is angry at evil, he is angry at the darkness of the human condition.

v. 5: "Behold, *you were angry*, and we sinned;"  
"We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. (Isaiah's talking about Israel.)

v. 9: "Be *not* so terribly angry, O Lord,"

I am always intrigued by American Literature classes that include a sermon or two as a part of our literary tradition. Because the one they always include is called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." It was preached by Jonathan Edwards, the former president of what is now Princeton University. It's kind of unfortunate, not because it is a bad sermon – it's really not! But because it *alone* has become THE emblematic sermon, the paradigmatic sermon of that time. And modern people hate it. The whole idea of the wrath of God makes people... angry!!

Tim Keller, who has studied and taught a course on the preaching of Jonathan Edwards at Gordon Conwell Seminary, says that most modern commentators will say about this sermon – to give it context for their students – "This is how people, this is how the Puritans used to think about God in those days – God is an angry God who punishes people – but today, more and more, we believe in a loving and good God who is accepting of people."<sup>1</sup>

One PCA pastor, RC Sproul, says that when he was in college, this sermon was presented as "evidence of an unbalanced mind." That Edwards had a fixation, a preoccupation, with hell, fire and damnation, and that Edwards must have been sadistic in his personality, that he would preach a sermon with such graphic images (he uses, you might remember, the image of a spider hanging by one thread of a web over an open flame. And he goes on to say, "Sinner, you hang over the pit of hell, suspended by one tiny thread, all the while the flames of divine wrath that are ready to dissolve that thread of self righteousness.) But if you really read Edwards, and all of his writings are now, still, in print, you know that to call Edwards "sadistic" is to misunderstand the man completely. He really believed in hell, he really believed in the wrath of God, and most of all, Edwards knew that human beings are *exposed* to the reality of that wrath. And he cared about that.

You see, if Edwards was sadistic in believing in hell, and believing in divine wrath against sin, and believing in *human* sin, he would have told people just the opposite! He would have preached, "Don't worry, don't bother. Hell is an archaic, Old Testament-only notion. God is not angry (Or as Rob Bell might simply say, "There is no hell,") ...and then secretly enjoyed, with gleeful anticipation, these people going there. No, Edwards believed that the bible spoke clearly about God's anger against sin, and about hell, and he wanted to awaken his people to the reality of it.

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<sup>1</sup> From a 1999 Keller Sermon.

Friends, the biblical God DOES get angry. You *need*, the bible says, a God who gets angry. You need a God who *must* get angry at sin. Because if you don't have that God, you lose hope, you lose love. *You lose Christmas*. Part of why the baby Jesus came 2,000 years ago *IS* anger. It's true. Let me see if I can show you.

This is football season. Today there will be some terrible officiating calls that are made by the officials. Many calls can be reviewed with instant replay, but some can't. And fans get very angry! Why? An injustice has been done! They want the guy up in that mysterious booth where the league officials are watching the game to get involved and overturn this injustice. They want hope! The only way that they are going to have hope that they will go home the victor is if someone who can see it all comes down from on high and says, "Let's look at what's happening down there."

On Thanksgiving Day there was a player who was so angry that he stomped on another player. Now what would have happened if there were no referees there, no judge in the booth, no one to assess a penalty on that kind of behavior? The teams would have cleared their benches! There would have been a free-for-all. Total violence and chaos. Because there would be no one to judge. No one to get angry over the *injustice*.

You see, the common notion is that a God of wrath, a God of vengeance is archaic. It's so retrograde and backward. We need to move *ahead* and get *beyond* this idea of an angry God because everyone knows we need a peaceful world.

Now listen closely to the argument. Because the assumption behind the argument is that a God of wrath at sin will mean a world of violence, conflict and wars. That there is a *direct connection* between the two. That is the assumption.

About 10 years ago, Miroslav Volf, the Yale Divinity School professor and theologian – and by the way, no evangelical – wrote a book on violence, conflict and racial and religious divisions. Volf is a Croatian Christian, and a lot of his thinking is shaped by looking at the history of violence in his own country, and attempts at peace, through the eyes of Scripture. And at the end of the book – *Exclusion and Embrace* – he states his thesis. (That in itself is interesting – most people would put their thesis up front, but his is on practically the last page of the book. And now you'll hear why!). This is what he says:

"My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. To the person who is inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone (which is where a paper that underlies this chapter was originally delivered). Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. The topic of the lecture: "A Christian Attitude Toward Violence." The thesis: we should not retaliate since "God is perfect noncoercive love."

Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to (is the result of) God's *refusal* to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, the idea will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind."

What's he saying? He's saying that a God who doesn't take the sword to violence is not a God who is worthy of worship.

Now listen, this guy is basically a pacifist. And he's no theological conservative – he's an Episcopalian. He knows that if he started the book that way, no one would have read any further! But his point is that anyone who says that a God-of-wrath-for-sin will lead to violence, has probably not been the *victim* of violence. Otherwise, you would have to pay that violence back – you'd have to stomp on the other guy, you'd have to pick up the sword yourself – unless you knew that there was *someone* who was going to mete out justice. That there *is* a God who gets angry at injustice. The only other option is to give up and die in despair. Do you see that? A perfect and holy judge of the world, who could not be angry at evil, could not possibly be good.

Look, this is counterintuitive. A God of wrath is a good thing? And we have to admit that historically, there HAVE been problems when sinful human beings think that THEY can mete out God's justice.

But the larger problem we have today is that when God is reduced to only love just that one attribute, or when that one attribute is raised ABOVE all of his other attributes, then hope, justice and peace are no longer possible. Friends, listen closely: God *is* love. He is! But as John Murray said, but "Love is not God." Do you see the difference? Love is *not* God's only attribute. We cannot reduce God down to only "love," and we can't make "love" our god. God is also a law giver – he is the ONLY law giver in Zion. He is a king. And any good king has the capacity to love. And love by its very nature is inimical to that which is *opposed* to love. For God to *be* a God of love – he has to be opposed to that which is destructive of love.

Friends, the reason God comes at Christmas is precisely because the real world IS fallen and sinful. And we need a God who is angry at all of the injustice that comes with sin

- God's Anger is his Love

Now when we say that we need a God of wrath, we need a God who comes with anger toward sin... we need to say that God's anger is *not* like your anger. Or my anger. God doesn't get angry out of ego, lack of control, crankiness or ill-temperedness.

God *is* the angriest "person" in the Bible. By far. It may surprise you, but in the New Testament, the words "wrath or "anger" with respect to God occur more often than statements about the love of God or the mercy of God. Remember our study of Romans: "For the wrath of God is *being* revealed from heaven (this the NT!) against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." But God's purpose in his anger is *redemptive*.

The goal of His anger is to draw people near. My anger is almost always destructive and pushes people away.

The problem we have with God's anger is that we project upon the character of God an equivalence, or an identity, between our emotions and behavior, and his. We interpret God's anger as our own. But God is not a touchy, petulant deity, who is given to temper tantrums and arbitrarily flies off the handle when he isn't pleased.

Look, another reason God gets angry – think about this – is that anger is something that moral beings do. If you are a moral person, the right response in certain situations WILL be anger. Anger can be righteous, holy, just and even redemptive. And yet as we all know, it can be destructive, evil and wicked. So the question is – is this anger good or bad? It's one of those issues that easily slips into that war – falls into that divide – between God and the devil. Anger *always* looks the same on the face of it. But at the level of *heart*, at the level of motivation, it could be very different. In other words, God has anger, the devil has anger, and *everyone in between* has anger.

Sinful, self-centered anger leads ultimately to murder. But godly anger can even save. Like when a parent shouts in anger because their child once again has gotten too close to a stove.

I *want* anger as part of my worldview. Because it's part of what it is to be made in the image of God. And as a Christian, if I'm going to have the mind of Christ, and think His thoughts after Him, then I am going to be angry with the things he's angry at. It's how I ought to respond to the things that are wrong. Like Jesus in the temple marketplace.

Now, here is the thing? Have you felt God's anger? Let me say that again: *Have you felt God's anger?*

Because if you haven't, then you cannot know his love. Don't you see? Because that is why he comes!

Look, many of us think that a wrathful God means that God can never love anyone. But the bible says that because God's anger is holy, God's anger is evidence of his love.

How can we say that? How can we be so sure? This takes us to our last point:

- God comes to remake the world and show us his face.

Look at v. 8: "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." God is compared to a father and a craftsman.

Have you thought about WHY a father gets angry? Or why a craftsman gets angry? Think about it. For a father, or for a craftsman, their love is the right and proper *cause* of their anger. Isn't that right?

As Ed Welch likes to say, "The opposite of love is not anger. Everyone thinks that anger and wrath create wars and only kill. No, the opposite of love is hate, and the ultimate form of hatred is indifference. In the Middle-East, it is "the hand." The covering of the eyes so that I don't even see you. But when you are passionate in your anger, you're saying, "This matters!" Anger can be VERY passionate and very caring! If God is not angry when we go wrong, then it proves we are *not* his beloved children, and we are not his beautiful creation.

Now, most people I know – I'm one of them – we don't like it when PEOPLE are angry with us. It ruins our day, it embarrasses us, it can be intimidating. But imagine what it would be like to have the God of the universe, angry with you. And to know that his anger at you – unlike a friend or family member – *is always both just, and justified.*

The image of God as a craftsman or artist is an interesting one, isn't it? Because Isaiah is saying that sin runs deep in our clay. It doesn't belong there; *God* didn't put it there. But it is so commingled with our clay, there's no getting rid of it by "cleaning up our acts." Sin is *more* than skin deep. Isaiah speaks for the nation, and us, when he says, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our *righteous* deeds are like filthy rags." Even our best efforts fall short. All the pious talk about peace, joy, love, goodwill in the month of December finds its counterpoint in scenes of people trampling one another to get their hands on the latest electronic gizmo, cursing their fellow man in traffic jams and shopping lines; boozing, bingeing, belching their way through holidays that are anything but holy days. Isaiah says that you can search out the clay, but wherever you put your fingers, it is polluted.

What would a craftsmen do about that? My family and I visited a glassblowing factory last week. And it's the kind of place where they let you see the workmen putting the glass in the oven on a steel stick, to soften it, and burn off the impurities. And then he or she makes it into something new.

God has to be angry. He just has to. Because like the craftsmen, he LOVES what he is making. But he can't put you into the fire. Because the impurities are everywhere. Our depravity is *extensive*. Total.

Friends, if you don't have a God of wrath, you will not have justice or love. You'll have a life of indifference, and at best a saccharine pretend love. Because it won't take evil seriously, But if you do have a God of wrath, but your God is not a father or a craftsman, well, what will his love cost him when things go wrong? Nothing! He won't care.

No, you have a God who loves, and who loves you like a father. And like a father who says, "I would do anything for my kids," your God is the judge who *is* judged. Jesus Christ took all of the anger, all of the wrath for all that is wrong with you, so that when you believe in him, there is no wrath left for you.

If you don't believe in sin, wrath, anger, justice, and hell, then all you have is a God who doesn't care. And you have no REAL idea about what God has done for you. At best you have a God of sentimentality. But you don't feel loved. And you're still a sinner... in the hands of your very nice god.

If you have a loving God *without* fury, you really have nothing. Others of you have a furious God without love, then you DO have something. But it will kill you.

But Christians, what we have is the Furious Love of God.

Let's pray