

“TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN!”

A Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2017

Text: Isaiah 64:1

Living in New Guinea ruined my life.

Christine and I had an idyllic life, in some ways, in our little home at Kopiago. It wasn't much of a house. Christine had to cook everything on a wood stove and fleas hopped through the floor of our bedroom, but it was ours, and we were happy. Linnea and Martha were born while we lived there.

When Martha was born, I made a big girl bed for Linnea. She loved it. I was happy and proud. And then my happiness was spoiled. Because she said, “Daddy, will you make a bed for my friend Yuguli?”

And I knew I could not. None of the Kopiago people slept in beds. They slept on the bark floors of their homes, next to fires. If I made Yuguli a bed she would need four times as much space in her family's home. And space in their houses was not reserved for beds. It was multipurpose.

So I could not make Linnea happy because I could not do a simple thing that would have been loving and kind and just. I couldn't make Yuguli rich like us. Even though by American standards we were below the poverty level, we were the most fabulously wealthy people in the valley. The only rich people Yuguli and her family knew.

Living in New Guinea made me feel that way about everything. So much is not right, not just, not fair. Sometimes, you just want to say to God, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

Christine and I now enjoy our own beautiful home with some 2,400 square feet of space that is just for us. We have beds and couches to spare. Two refrigerators. A pool table.

But living in New Guinea means that, in the back of my mind where important decisions are made, I can never totally enjoy it. Always, there lurks the memory of thousands of people I knew and loved, who to this day lack proper sanitation and safety and can afford nothing more than a few buckets of nails with which to put together a house the best they can. One which the tropical weather will destroy in a few years, so they can build it again. Their hundred and fifty square feet of home, no mod cons.

How is that fair? “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

When I was little I was poor, and I aspired to leave that behind. Get a good and secure job, not have to look at the prices of groceries. I made it. With a little help from my friends.

But I shrink from the statistics of how many people still lack the essentials for life. And it is not just statistics. A Muslim neighbor of mine grew up in Bangladesh. He now lives in Ivy Hills. But I'm sure that in the back of his mind are the millions of people who still flee the floods in the monsoon season. How is that right? “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

From Martin Luther Seminary, where we lived in the 1990's, the road to Lae goes through Butibam village. After a motorist struck and killed a child who was playing in the road, the villagers blocked the road with coconut trees, empty drums, and an engine block. They put up a sign that said “War zone.” Except that, because of their poor English, they spelled war “w-o-e.” How perfect it was. An Australian who tried to circumvent the blockade had his windscreen smashed and lost an eye.

Woe zone.

How should the world be, instead of being one big “woe zone”?

How about this? People should honor their parents, and gladly love and serve them. All the time. People should always help and support their neighbors when they get sick or suffer; and not only particular friends but everyone around them. People should lead pure and decent lives—in word and deed—and husbands and wives should always love and honor each other. Men and women should treat each other with the greatest respect. People should be concerned about the property and possessions of their neighbors, thinking only of how to help them preserve and protect them for their use and enjoyment. In everything like this, people should treat other people the way we want to be treated. We should only speak kindly of other people, building one another up and encouraging one another. We should be of service to our neighbors. “Slaves of everyone,” as Luther put it.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” for that is not the world I live in. And, after living in New Guinea fourteen years, I find it really difficult to enjoy the occasional highlight which sensationalizes one act of kindness. I wish it were true that to save one starfish or light one candle or save one person’s life was enough; but I yearn, with pain, for the day when the exception will become the rule and we will stop tearing each other apart in the effort to make things better.

What would it look like if God would “tear open the heavens and come down”?

Last week we heard from one prophet who warned us not to ask God to come down, because it would be ugly. Given the parlous state of the world, if God were to judge us aright, none of us would be rewarded. We should say like the prophet Isaiah, having a vision of God descending, who cried out “Woe is me!”

What would it look like if God were to “tear open the heavens and come down”?

I think we know. And it still kind of shocks us. When God tore open the heavens and came down, it took the form of a baby born in no hospital to a poor young woman; a baby who grew up to perfect the art of caring, yet never minced words about the perilous state of people’s hearts and minds, and who lived in a wretched colony where justice was practically nonexistent; yet who signaled to us that God has decided that you and I should have his blessing and his righteousness and his peace and his job—to save the world. That is what it looked like, the little window of time when the sky was torn open and God became incarnate for our sake and for the sake of the whole blooming world.

It looked not like lightning, but like a feather falling from above.

It sounded like the melody from the third movement of the second string quartet of Alexander Borodin:

[At this point in the sermon the organist played the musical selection printed at the foot of the sermon below.]

That is the sound of God tearing open the heavens and coming down.

Living in New Guinea, as I said before, ruined my life. I am so skeptical not only about the injustices of our world but also about human solutions. I will always be bothered by the enormity of our difficulties, by the way injustice is embedded in every system we call justice, by the way music, education, invention, and all sorts of wonderful gifts—including justice!—get weaponized to help people climb over other people to get what they want for themselves, protect themselves, preserve their own prerogatives. The world needs a spirit transplant so badly. We need something different in the backs of our minds than self-interest.

Here it is, in the evidence of God become human, God having once and for all torn open the heavens and come down to save us from ourselves.

Advent, we cry to God. We cry for God's help. Advent, we are promised: Help has come. Clean out the back of your mind, let go of fear and doubt, and allow the Spirit of the Crucified One to occupy you with thoughts of God's merciful judgment on you and on all the world. Let God in.

A few years after the terrible tragedy of Butibam village, the road being open again, with only a bad section of pavement for a reminder of the "woe zone," I was driving through Butibam with my family when I struck a pig and killed it. Being a little afraid for my family and myself, I drove on to the seminary. But I went back, with a few students to give me courage, and looked for the owner of the pig so I could pay the customary compensation and make things right. So I would be safe in future.

I found the old man quickly. I offered him what I thought was a generous price for his pig, and apologized. But instead of taking it, he smiled at me and said, in Pidgin of course, "It was just a pig. You killed it, we ate it. You owe me nothing."

He forgave me. In a woe zone, where things were still not just in so many ways, where there were problems I, one American missionary, could never hope to address, much less solve. The old, poor, black man forgave the young, rich, white man.

That, too, will always be in the back of my mind.

Tear open the heavens and come down, O Lord, this Christmas, and at this Eucharist, with forgiveness and healing in your hand. Tear open the backs of our minds and come into our hearts.

Amen

Andante *cantabile ed espressivo*
Flute *p*

Andante
Piano *p*

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segno

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.