

Advent (the archaic word for “Coming”) is the time in the church calendar when we take a few steps back from our ongoing daily struggles to get a more broad perspective on things—on our lives, on the broad sweep of history, on the fate of the world. Advent is meant to be the time when we prepare ourselves to look backwards to the first Advent, the initial Coming of God into the world in Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah—Immanuel, “God With Us.” Most of Christendom also looks forward to the Second and Final Advent, the Big Wrap-up, when God comes back to set everything right and to show the world He has been God all along, after all, despite a ton of apparent evidence to the contrary.

[The themes of Advent run against the grain of our popular culture in some subtle ways. Advent is a time of waiting—but who wants to wait four weeks, not to mention until the end of human history when we get terminally frustrated with our antiquated dial-up connection and we gladly pay extra so we won’t have to wait ten seconds for our internet transmission.

Advent is a season of Hope, certainly, but even the Hope of Advent is not much good to us on our own conventional terms. Our inclination is to want the Hope of Advent but without “going into the place” where we could fully experience God’s Hope for us and for the world. Like ancient Israel, we sometimes think “wouldn’t it be nice if God would actually come down here to planet earth, set things right, put an end to the struggles and the misery and the hassles and the pollution and the wars—and set all those other people straight who really need it, while He’s at it”—but without our first paying the price of acknowledging our own desperation, of brokenness, of hopelessness. It is I who really needs it.

It’s not natural, even for us followers of Christ, to want fully to experience the salvation He offers. This would imply that we cannot save ourselves, that we are otherwise hopeless, that the entire spirit of our age and of our nation is mistaken—that we “can do,” can overcome, can lift ourselves up by our bootstraps, can attain the life God intends us to enjoy—all “on our own.” On the contrary, most Americans, do we not, spend our lives trying to “get it together,” trying to attain the good life—trying at all costs to *avoid* being desperate or hopeless or needy of a Savior. It’s an embarrassment to think about—someone like me should actually need a Savior because I cannot do the job myself! Shocking.]

The people of God to whom this author of Isaiah 64 was writing enjoyed one advantage over most Americans today. They harbored no illusions about being in control, able to save themselves. They had been discouraged, kicked around, broken. They had more or less survived the Exile in Babylon, when their grandparents had been seized and chained and forced off their ancestral homeland to go live in a foreign land far from Jerusalem. They had now returned to their Land—but feeling guilty, powerless, vulnerable, tentative. How could they trust in God when God had failed to protect them against the barbarians from Babylon? Where had God been when they needed Him? If God was so great, why was their life so hard and unfair?

They were so desperate their best hope was a little divine intervention—“O, that You would come down and get tough and straighten things out, but good!” “You’ve done it in the past—remember Pharaoh, remember Jericho, remember David and all his

victories—You could do it again!” “We are out of bright ideas, out of options, out of bullets! Help! Come down and save us, O LORD!” [vv 1-4]

Then the tone of this prayer to God drastically changes. “...But we have sinned; we have transgressed. All our righteous deeds are like filthy rags, so foul nobody would even touch them; like a fallen dead leaf swept away in the wind to...wherever...” [v 6] All that bravado—“Get down here and take care of business for us!” has instantly faded away in contrite recognition of the reality. “But we have gone our own way, we have failed You, we have not taken You seriously, O God... we admit it. “There is not one of us who truly calls upon Your name, who fully trusts in You...” [v 7]

This is an authentic Advent hope. They yearn for God to come down, yet they honestly admit their actions have only pushed God further away. They know they are not worthy, do not deserve the salvation of their God, yet they have nowhere else to turn. They are desperate yet hopeful; their continuing failures have not defeated their longing to trust in God yet once again, deserving or not.

In the midst of this tension the prayer again changes tone in a dramatic way. Verse 8 begins with a little word... “Yet...” Yet in spite of our spotty record, in spite of our lukewarmness toward You, Yet in spite of our failure to take You seriously and to live fully as if You were our God...Yet in spite of our tendency to worship false gods and to live as if we are perfectly capable of saving ourselves...Yet “You are our Father.” “You are our Potter; we are all the work of Your hand.” Yes, God, we have failed You: but You are still our Father—we are Your idea, Your problem, Your responsibility, Your burden, Your project, Your treasured possession. “We have a deep and desperate trust in You, O God—but You have an abiding obligation toward us.

So the conclusion: because You are our Father, and You owe it to us to forgive us, to stick with us, therefore do not be so angry with us, O God; do not keep holding our sin against us; remember: we are Your children, Your family...” [v 9] This lesson which began in bombast and shouting closes with heartfelt communication; with intimacy and renewed relationship. Our Advent hope is not ultimately in God’s overwhelming firepower, God’s power and might to come down and bully the bullies—but in God’s faithfulness to continue to love us, to forgive us, as a Mother does her wayward child, as a Father does his confused teenager. Our hope is in God’s changing us, changing others, saving us all.

Most of us do not feel powerless or desperate most of the time. Many of us enjoy more resources than most. But we know will each one of us face death; we will each one of us surely face that final vulnerability. This is how I want to approach our Advent theme this morning, and for the next three Sundays. We may not all agree with the universal Church that God will come down to set things right in a Second Coming, a “Final Wrap-up,” but I suspect we agree that every human being is going to die, and come face-to-face with the sovereign God of the universe.

What is the true nature of the God of the universe, and how will God dispose of us all when we die? How will God accomplish His salvation? What becomes of Christians? Non-Christians? Anti-Christians? Are we sent to heaven, sent to hell? What would be the point? This is all part of our Advent preparation—how could I trust my life to a God whom I do not believe is finally, eternally, merciful? What does Jesus Christ the Son reveal about the nature of God?

What do you think? What do the Scriptures tell us? Does God owe His children forgiveness, as Isaiah seems to assume? How about those opposed to God? Mass murderers? Many Christians would maintain that yes, “God is love,” but God is also a God of justice; that God’s sense of justice requires that our sin must be punished (or atoned for, paid for, by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.) Jesus commands us to forgive others (“...forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors...”)—but this would be a peculiar commandment were God exempt from this same principle, and, for the rest of our eternal lifetime, once we died, we were forever barred from ever again entering into personal, loving, relationship with God. It would surely be an odd way for God to show His divine love for each of His creatures—by banishing the “bad actors” away from His presence, forever. (And even then, would it be the terribly bad actors, or the moderately bad actors, or us garden variety semi-bad actors?)

Some believe that the justice of God and the love of God are two distinct, opposing, unrelated attributes of the divine nature, rather than two facets of the same character. We will come back to this question, but for now let’s assume the nature of God is, or could be, divided in this way. Let’s assume God is perfectly just, which precludes any freebies deposited into our accounts. (No grace, mercy, forgiveness.) Even if God were a perfectly just and “impartial” God: can you think of how it would make sense that my sins against my friends and family and neighbor and, OK, against people I have never even met, would need to be punished by an eternity spent in hell, with no chance for parole, no “get out of jail” card possible? I don’t deny the printout of my sins and transgressions, of omission and commission, would be a very long list—I’m getting older—and I don’t mean to make light. (I fully expect that I and each one of us will be judged according to our deeds—“For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.” [2 Cor 5:10])

So that reckoning, that sure judgment, will not be a pretty sight. But still: I’m only human. I can only hurt a finite number of people, even if I live to be a hundred. I can only hurt myself so much, for so long. So how is it just to believe that when I die God will hold my finite (plenty, but not infinite) sins against me, infinitely long?

This line of reasoning obviously makes no sense—that a just God will send us to hell eternally as penalty for us to pay the price for sins committed temporally. A very long time might make sense (some of you were brought up with the concept of Purgatory)—but not to be punished for eternity. Very faithful and very intelligent theologians from Augustine on down have maintained that God’s eternal punishment is just, and it is exactly what us sinners deserve. Augustine—a stunningly brilliant mind and spirit (but one living in the 4th Century) attributed our innate sinfulness to the original sin of Adam. (Obviously I think he got this part wrong.) John Calvin, another brilliant thinker and in some senses the brains behind our Reformed/Congregationalist way of understanding God, defended God’s right (or need) to punish us eternally in this way:

“Original sin...seems to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul. [Consequently] we are so perverted in every part of our nature that by this great corruption we stand justly condemned and convicted before God, to whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness, innocence, and purity.” [Institutes; Book II, Chapter I, section 8]

Augustine and Calvin were very smart guys, but I do not buy this logic, which is saying “because our inherited original sin, our innate separation from God is so deeply rooted, therefore God, who is perfectly holy, is absolutely correct in permanently and unequivocally condemning us.” I agree God is perfectly holy, and that I stand convicted before God—but not as a result of Adam’s sin, and not as a result of something over which I have no control. It’s hardly just to believe that God creates us, the Potter the clay, to have an innately sinful nature—then God sends us to hell when we turn out to be sinful. If our innate human nature is depraved, then God has more to deliver us from, to *save* us from, no doubt—but not more to forgive us for.

But all this discussion of original sin still sidesteps the main question: how can any human rebellion or sinfulness—committed by us humans who are by nature limited in wisdom, power, knowledge, capacity (whether or not totally depraved at the core of our being)—justly deserve eternal punishment?

I think there is one coherent argument for the position that every sinner deserves to suffer everlastingly at the hand of a just God for committing limited, timebound sins—however many. It was advanced by Anselm of Canterbury, in the 14th Century. (He, too, was a product of his age.) Here’s how he upheld Augustine’s position: Anselm reasoned that every sin is a sin against God—so sin is not to be punished as a result of actual or potential or even intended harm done to others, but by virtue of its offense against God of unlimited integrity, honor, holiness. Therefore God is just to punish any and every sinner infinitely because God, being the One wounded by every sin, is infinitely good.

This is coherent, but not logical. For one thing, where is the justice in every sin, however tiny or grave, being punished the same—as if parking in a green pavement loading zone for 16 minutes rather than the legal 15 deserves the same fine as the driver who intentionally plows into a crowd of children to see how many he can take out. Even though it is true that every sin is a sin against our Creator, pulling off that little sign on your pillow (“do not remove under penalty of law”) should not get you life in prison. A 3-year old could tell something’s wrong with that argument. It is hardly worthy of God.

For another thing, in addition to being illogical, these theories totally misunderstand the character of God—God who has, as a matter of fact, come down to us in God the Son, Jesus the Christ. At some point, punishment for the sake of punishment—even if the offense were infinite—becomes merely diabolical. What if Anselm were correct: that every transgression is a sin against God of infinite goodness, a blot upon God’s honor, so therefore every sin deserves infinite punishment to make good and to repay the infinite debt incurred. After a while, according to the purposes of God or even strict justice, what point is there in simply inflicting more pain for longer duration on the sinner? This manner of thinking has more to do with the mind of the enemy than the mind of Christ.

There is an obvious limit which any system of justice, divine or human, soon bumps up against. Perfect justice would aim to redress the wrong suffered; it would try to eliminate the advantage gained by the criminal and to eliminate the disadvantage suffered by the victim. The earliest ethical systems (called *Lex Talionis*, “an eye for an eye” recognized these goals, and represented a great movement forward. You put out my eye, and the law requires your eye gets put out. This means I don’t get to put out both your eyes, or kill you or your children—and society is rescued from perpetual cycles of escalating vengeance and violence.)

But real crime, real sin, real injustice, is not usually so simple. If someone steals \$100 from me, maybe I can recover my \$100 from the thief. But what about trauma of the burglary or trespass or violation in my psyche—who puts the value on that sin? And if someone puts out my eye, I could put out his—but even that does not get me my eye back. In some sense I'm better off if I can find an eye surgeon to restore my eyesight, rather than focusing my energy on trying to get even with the one who hurt me. (The State has a necessary interest in trying to execute justice, and retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, a prior pattern of wrongdoing, mercy, and a lot of other facts may all enter in. But that's beyond the point for this morning.) We human beings have not the wisdom, nor the data, nor the power to administer perfect justice.

God, however, does not share the human limitations of the State. God has time, wisdom, all the data, and all of eternity to make everything right. What might a loving and just God want to accomplish with His own policy of eternal justice? What would nullify or, better yet, correct, fix the problems brought about by sin?

The source of sin is our alienation, our separation from God. (Not because Adam sinned and chose separation, but because each of us freely does so.) As a result of our being out of right relationship with God, everything else gets messed up. We fear rather than trust God, and then, not trusting who we really are, not loving our neighbor as our selves and not even loving ourselves as God loves us—the result is we have a big mess down here on planet earth. (No disagreements on this.) The solution to the problem of sin is not merely punishment, though that has its place. The solution is repentance and reconciliation—right?

We hear that God hates sin—no question. So God has come down, the Father has sent the Son, to provide us a divine alternative to continuing to perpetuate the big mess, business as usual, on planet earth. (Blue replaces red in Washington; we'll get a new Secretary General of the United Nations soon. Do fans of either party believe the reds or the blues will fix things, really fix things, even in this blessed nation—let alone the whole world? (“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself.” [2 Cor 5:17]) We are not forced to choose the way of repentance and reconciliation—but it is available. In this life and the next, I believe. God's eternal purpose is no less than for each one of us to be reconciled to Him, and then to each other and to all of His creation.

Merely punishing the sinner, from Saddam Hussein to you or me, (capable of a lot more evil, I am confident, than we ever imagine) does not ultimately serve God's purpose. Punishment has its place, in God's eternal order just as in any loving and functional household. A household or universe of “No consequences” makes for chaos, and would teach children and adults to become less than fully human. [[If and when we punish, the purpose is growth and improvement; for our kids, or for us, to get back on the right track. I will try every other means first, but if my leniency to my children is only encouraging them to persist in heading in the wrong direction, hurting themselves and others, then my love requires that I get tough and that they know it. More of the same “soft” consequences don't always work. More of this in two weeks.]]

But for God eternally to fry any sinner, like a caged animal forever tormented, is not what God is about—any more than any effective mother or father raising their children. God desires repentance and reconciliation, in the end. Clearly a mass murderer is totally out of touch with what it is to lose a loved one; he is unable or unwilling to imagine the pain and horror and loss the families of the victims must live with. To turn

up the voltage on the pain meter for the murderer, for a time, might make sense if and when it's God's only means left for them to be saved. (Odd choice of words, I know.)

Strict justice would require that the sinner actually feel what pain he caused his victims to feel. But a hardened, perpetually unrepentant sinner would feel no empathy, would feel nothing beyond his own sensory pain from the torments of hell. Still, however, a human monster suffering intense pain is not yet what God desires—he's not learning any lessons, not becoming any more human, not coming any closer to understanding the evil he has done or the pain he has inflicted. While the victims, in their worst moments, might be happy with this outcome—the criminal suffering intensely, at least for a few million years—at their best moments, they would be a lot more happy if the murderer could one day come to appreciate, even feel, something of their loss. If the murderer were to become repentant, if the murder could one day apologize in a heartfelt and sincere manner, that would help everyone. If this process could unfold, there could even result repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation. [Many of these insights are gleaned from the book *The Inescapable Love of God*, by Thomas Talbott.]

No less than this—repentance and reconciliation—is what God is after, what God has come down to offer us in this Way of life, in costly and wonderful relationship to Jesus the Christ. In this lifetime and in the next. God's justice, God's eternal purposes, will be accomplished when Saddam Hussein, and every single one of us, doesn't just blow away like a dead leaf and either "get away with" murder, or get eternally tortured because we died and went to hell. God's way will have prevailed when Saddam Hussein, and you and me, become human enough, enough like our Savior, that we come to feel the pain of those around us, and when we have come to love those we have hurt enough willingly to take upon ourselves the pain we had caused them. Something like this is reconciliation; this is salvation.

This is the final wrap-up acceptable to God, who is love.

God has come down, in our Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus is very good at what He does. God has all eternity in which to bring it about. I think He's going to pull it off.

Isaiah 64:1-9

64:1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--as 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!

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From 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. You 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. We 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. There 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.

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

