

The God Who Hides  
Isaiah 64:1-12  
Mark 13:24-37

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...."

While the culture begins the season of Advent with shoppers in search of bargains, the church begins the season of Advent with human beings in search of God. Be assured, I do not mean this as a slight toward those who have set out this morning for the mall. Quite the opposite! I mention both in the same sentence because I am taken with the coincidence between shoppers and supplicants. Both of us assume that what we seek—a present or a Presence—is ours to find. Moreover, we share a common hope that the gift or the god we find will have something to do with what will make us and those we love happy. Now I am willing to entertain the possibility that a season spent searching in this way may lead you to find the perfect gift; however, I cannot say the same about this method of searching for the God who hides. Therefore I want to spend this first Sunday of Advent doing business with our seeking and God's hiding as well as with our hiding and God's seeking.

Advent is the season when we wait and watch for the God known only in hiding and yet the God who seeks us here and now. This is the season when we ready ourselves to do business with the paradox of the God who dwells in heaven's heights and yet the God who has pitched a tent in the flesh of our broken humanity. This is the season before the season when we proclaim the paradox of the God who is without image and yet the God whose glory we see in the face of Jesus Christ. In words which push human speech to the very edge of what words can say, like the words we read in Isaiah and Mark this morning, we will listen as the biblical witness reveals one God: ultimately unknowable and intimately known, transcendent (above all) and, in the same breath, immanent (in all). In these days hastening to the manger, the paradox of God's transcendence and immanence is the paradox of the God who hides and the God who seeks.

As for our own hiding and seeking, we generally set out in search of a God who may be transcendent (above all), but that *is* all. Because reason or science or philosophy dictates how we know what we know, the God our minds can grasp often is a God we imagine to be above it all and at a distance from our cries. "I believe in a supreme being," we say, "a greater power, the source of life, creator of the universe." As for our relationship with this transcendent Being-Above-the-Fray, there is nothing much to say in the light of day.

But what of our darkest nights when the 'notion of a supreme being' does not avail? In our darkest nights, the *idea* of God places us in the hand--or more accurately beyond the hand--of a Being who, to borrow Isaiah's words, looks down from heaven, from God's holy and glorious habitation, but is powerless to help. Therefore in extremis, as the Israelites were in extremis, we demand that God come down, that God enter human history. "Nothing can save us that is possible," chants the chorus in W. H. Auden's Christmas Oratorio, "We who must die demand a miracle."

A few centuries later the hiding God does come down to seek and save the lost. According to Mark's Gospel, the kingdom of God, the reign of God comes near as unclean spirits are exorcised, the sick cured, lepers cleansed, sinners forgiven, five thousand fed, a storm stilled, and the dead raised. But God's seeking does not change the fact that the God who is revealed is still the God who hides--first in a manger and then on a cross. "Luther in particular was right," Karl Barth writes, "when he interpreted the swaddling clothes and the manger as the Holy Scripture of the Old Testament in which Christ was revealed, but revealed in concealment....Revelation," he goes on, "never has a recognizable form, its wisdom and power can never be proved, its triumph is never apparent, its success is not tangible, and its benefit not for immediate enjoyment." Because this is not the God we were seeking, we substitute the God who hides in places we would just as soon avoid for the God we can domesticate within us. "Here's the thing," Alice Walker's Shug says. "The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it."

The biblical witness has nothing to do with either the notion of a God far removed or a God deep within. Rather it tells the story of God who is "above all things" and also "in all things," the story of God-with-us who always comes to us from outside ourselves. In other words, Scripture speaks of God's transcendence and immanence in one and the same breath, one and the same person. Sunday in and Sunday out, we tell each other the story of this God who both hides and seeks: through the garden of our discontent and the wilderness of our exodus, through the satiated temples of our settled worship and even in the abandoned cries of our exile. This is

the same God who came so close as to rest a foot on a portable ark but stayed hidden in a cloud which settled over the tent of meeting far outside the camp...who refused a house for the sake of divine freedom and yet dictated every detail of Solomon's temple that God might dwell on earth...who quit the temple and banished God's chosen ones until, by prophet's word foretold, God's cosmic game of hide and seek comes down to one silent night, one angel's announcement, one mother great with child and one child really born, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

But if the high and holy God came down two thousand years ago, why Advent? Why a season of waiting and watching for the high and holy God who is with us? I think it is because Christ's first coming did not do away with but deepened the paradox of the God who hides and yet the God who seeks to be known here and now. Christ's first coming did not collapse but sharpened the paradox of the God who dwells in heaven's heights and yet the God who has pitched a tent in the flesh of our broken humanity. Christ's first coming both reveals and conceals the paradox of the God who is without image and yet the God whose glory we see in the face of Jesus Christ. Therefore we are a people on the lookout for the God who hides in manglers and crosses, in bread and wine, among publicans and sinners; who hides in the alto section on Thursday night as well as the Salvation Army's tolling bell at Pathmark; among the women coaxing beauty out of cut flowers in the kitchen on Saturday and the children growing vegetables on the front lawn in the summer for the guests at Face to Face in Germantown; in the upper room at Campbell's where community takes hold and the basement of West Kensington Ministry where hope is born of sawdust; in Widener Hall surrounded by Souls Shot and at the Kimmel as Cristian Macelaru conducts Handel's Messiah: we are a people on the lookout for the high and holy God who hides among us until Christ comes again.

Therefore keep awake, I tell you. For simply everything you do and everyone you meet just may be the means God is using to seek you, may be your closest glimpse of God from highest heaven who is pitching a tent with you, may be God's messenger sending you even unto Bethlehem to see God hiding in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, until Christ comes again. "How strange," Karl Barth observes, "for the swaddling clothes and the manger speak of segregation, poverty, oppression and need....Who would look there for the wonder that God in the highest and mortals on earth have really and truly become one?" Maybe by the end of Advent, we will. Let us pray:

God of the small, the subtle, the unimportant,  
God of the vague, the dark, the ambiguous,  
open our hearts to your coming.

Open our eyes to the little signs,  
our ears to the soft murmurs.  
Slow us down to listen and hear.  
Keep us low to look and see.

Awaken us to the losses that are blessings,  
the wounds that are openings,  
the weaknesses that are empty manglers.

Wake us from the stupor of busyness,  
the daze of desire,  
to witness your drawing near,  
to behold your presence,

[hidden] in this ordinary moment  
this feeble prayer,  
this beating heart.

Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come! Amen.