

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, November 30, 2014**

COME, LORD JESUS

Isaiah 64:1-9

Today, New Year's Day (you thought that was January 1, right?), is the Christian's New Year's Day, the first day of Advent. It is the first day of a new liturgical year, a new year of remembrance and celebration of the acts of God in Jesus Christ. Today, New Year's Day, the waiting begins in earnest. Children, starting tomorrow, will begin opening the doors on Advent calendars, counting down the days until that magical Christmas morning they've been dreaming about now for weeks. Adults will be looking forward to one of the high moments of the church year, as we celebrate the coming to earth of the Savior of the World.

For all Christians, today begins a period of reflection, meditation, repentance, preparation, a period of waiting for God to act in a fresh, new way in our lives and in the lives of the whole world. Advent, beginning today, is a time of watchful waiting. Not waiting for the incarnation of Christ, of course, or for His coming to earth as a human being, born of the Virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit. After all, that happened 2,000 years ago. We're not waiting for that. Rather, we begin our wait today to see how God is going to make the incarnation a tangible, meaningful reality in our lives at this particular point in our existence.

The prophet Isaiah gives us some hints for that in the 64th Chapter of his book. Let's take a look at these words that are words of God and yet also words of Isaiah, not just on his own behalf but on behalf of all of Israel, words spoken to God. He begins by asking God to move in the lives of His people. "O, that You would rend the heavens and come down." He knows that God can do that. He knows that God has done that and because he knows that He has, and he knows that He will again, his prayer is for God to do so and to do so now. He reminds Him in verses 2 and 3 of just how amazing that can be when He does it. "As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make Your name known to Your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you." Come down not just to influence a life here and there – though undoubtedly that will happen – come down and shake the world to its foundations. Speak to the nations, speak to the peoples, speak to the kings. Let them hear Your word and Your will. "For when You did awesome things that we did not expect, You came down and the mountains trembled before you" (verse 3). He had something specific in mind here, in case you're wondering. He's not just talking about general rumblings of nature. He's hearkening back to the Exodus. Listen to this from Exodus 19:16-19. This is at Mt. Sinai. The Exodus has taken place and the people of God, Israel, have left Egypt. They are now in the Sinai Peninsula. They are at the foot of the mountain, soon to receive God's Law.

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning,
and a thick cloud on the mountain,
and a very loud trumpet blast,

so that all the people in the camp trembled.
Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God.

Can you imagine? “O, come, wake up, it’s morning. Time to get going. We have to meet God!” It’s better than any alarm bell you could possibly want, especially if you’re looking to scare people to death. “And they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln and the whole mountain trembled greatly and as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him in thunder.” You can hear that in Isaiah clearly, can’t you? The fire, the mountain, the trembling, it’s there. And Isaiah is asking God to do it again. Yes, the circumstances are different, obviously. We’re not back at Mt. Sinai awaiting the giving of the Law. But we need You to act again.

Now the first time that God acted, Israel was saved from Egypt, saved from slavery, saved from oppression under a people that did not know God. Now, the request as we’ll see in just a moment, is for another kind of liberation, another kind of deliverance, this time from the sin that plagues them and continually disrupts their relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Isaiah knows that when God acts He frequently does so in ways that we’re not looking for. He says in verse 3, “For when you did awesome things that we did not expect...” Think about the Exodus. Think about the stuff that God did to facilitate their deliverance. Sending a guy who was wanted for murder, a non-Egyptian, to the most powerful man on earth, to demand that he do what in a million years he would never decide to do on his own: Let go the rather profitable slaves who work on his various projects. Sending plagues upon Egypt, meant to demonstrate God’s power and meant also to harden the resolve of Pharaoh not to give in. And so we see natural plagues and we see unnatural plagues such as that of the darkness and the death of the first born. And finally Pharaoh says, “Go!” and yet even as he says go, what he thinks in his own mind is, “Go and die!” Because he has no intention of letting this people go and so he charges after them into the wilderness and through the sea and winds up drowned with the rest of his army as God triumphs over the gods of Egypt and over Pharaoh’s world and power.

That wasn’t foreseeable. That was God acting as He chose to act. And in the years, the centuries following Isaiah, God acted again in a way that could never have been expected. Think about the incarnation. The Son of God coming into the world, not with trumpets and fanfare, not riding a great horse down the middle of the street in the greatest city in the world, not taking a throne at the head of the world’s empire. In short, the God who had delivered Israel from Egypt with mighty show of power after mighty show of power, coming this time to save His people in the form of an infant born in a stable in a backwater, tiny town that no one outside of Israel had ever heard of before. Unexpected? Yes. Unexpected for the entire world. Unexpected, maybe a bit less so, for those in Israel who knew of what the Lord was going to do. But there weren’t very many of them. God acted unexpectedly. And He is still acting unexpectedly. He is still acting in the world in ways that confound us, baffle us, and even more, baffle the world.

For centuries what was the most Christian part of the world? The continent of Europe. For centuries Europe was as Christian as there was anywhere in the world. More so. Today, there are countries in Europe with 95% citizenry baptized in the church and 5% attendance on any given morning to worship the Lord. That's not what you would call a vibrant Christian community. At least not on the kind of scale that has been seen in Europe in the past.

So, what is God doing? Well, He's going to places we would never have guessed. The center of gravity of the Christian church in the world today is no longer in Rome or in London or even in the United States. The center of gravity in the church in the world now is in poor villages in Africa, tiny towns in South America, industrial cities in communist China. God is still very much at work in the world. I know there are times when Americans who have a tendency not to be able to see beyond the shores of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans or north of the northern border or south of the Rio Grande, have a tendency to think this is the world. And the church seems to be weakening here. Attendance is down. Giving is down. Hundreds of churches close each week. Yes, new ones open, but basically the church doesn't seem to be in very good shape here in the center of the universe. Well guess what? This isn't the center of the universe anymore. The center of the universe is where the poor are. The center of the Christian universe is where the powerless are. The center of the Christian universe is where the persecuted are. That's not to say that God has abandoned Europe or the United States or that He no longer loves His people in these places. Obviously, He does. It's to say that if you would ask someone in 1900 where the Christian church would be dominant in the world in the year 2000, no one would have said Africa or East Asia. I know that because surveys were taken at the time. No one saw that coming. God works in unexpected ways.

Even in the United States God works in some unexpected ways in some unexpected places. I think you've probably heard of the pastor Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, in Manhattan. Who said God doesn't have a sense of humor. One of the most influential Presbyterian churches in the United States is in the middle of Sodom and Gomorrah. And it doesn't minister just to the poor or the downtrodden. It ministers to college students, 20-somethings, upper middle-class people, as well as the poor and the downtrodden. And it started over 250 churches in the New York area and elsewhere in the country. Who would have said, thirty years ago, that one of the great church planting movements in America was going to be headquartered near Times Square? That wouldn't have hit me. I wouldn't have thought of that. I may have thought of Nashville or Charlotte or Dallas. But no. God is working in some unexpected ways. He's even doing that right here, in northern Virginia. Have you any idea how many churches there are in this area that have been up and running in ministry for less than 10 years? Would you believe over 500 in the D. C. metro area? Now they don't all look like Faith. Some of them like our brothers and sisters across the road meet in a movie theater. Some of them are ministering to people who don't speak English. They speak Spanish or Korean or they speak an African language. And many of them can't fit all the people they have into whatever space they're using and are already looking for a new and larger one. Even here, in the center of worldly power in the known universe, the gospel is at work and God

is acting. And He's acting as Isaiah asked Him to. To rend the heavens, to come down, to do unexpected things in unexpected places among unexpected people and in the process to build His kingdom. He's doing that even here.

Now the second thing that Isaiah says that is really important that we need to hear, is that our God is the only source of the salvation that Isaiah is calling for. The only one. It says in verse 4, "Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any god besides You who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him." The gods of the ancient world – of course they weren't real – but to the extent that their followers made them real in the same way that one makes an idol real – they were not gods who came looking for people. They were gods who expected others, who expected people to come to them bearing gifts and maybe if they like the gift or if they just felt like it, they would do some good things for them. They would bring rain. They would bless them with children. They would give them a time of peace. They would make their crops grow. Or maybe they wouldn't. Who knew? But the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob acts on behalf of those who wait for Him. He doesn't wait for us. We wait for Him. And we wait in expectation knowing He will act on our behalf. Not on His own behalf. That's the interesting thing about the gods of the ancient world – the Roman gods, the Babylonian gods, the Egyptian gods. They seemed to be in it for themselves, which sounds funny until you realize that they're made in the image of human beings. The ancient gods were greedy, power-hungry, obsessive, irrational. Gee, who do they sound like? They sound like us, because they were made in our image. But the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, He is very different. We are made in His image, which is why we are capable – if we're capable of it at all – of doing for others, of putting others before ourselves, of looking out for others' best interests, of loving others. We're only capable of that because God has built a part of Himself, His image into every one of us. Now that image is corrupted, which is why we do the terrible stuff that winds up reflected in the idols that we make. But the point is, the God who we worship is the One who acts for us. He acts for us when we don't deserve it. He acts for us when we're not looking for it. He acts for us in unexpected ways. He acts for us when we least expect Him.

The language here is very different from the language that other ancient religions used about their gods. This one bespeaks of a personal relationship, one in which a loving Father acts for the good of His children. Look at verse 8 for just a moment: "O, LORD, you are our Father." That expression hardly ever turns up in the Old Testament. God is not referred to as Father very often at all. It was Jesus who popularized that way of looking at God as our Father and not, by the way, made in the image of an earthly father. It's the other way around, so that inadequacies are not to be blamed on God but on the earthly father. God, in fact, is the archetype for fatherhood and as such is perfect. But here in this passage of Isaiah we have God referred to as Father. And we think in terms not necessarily of our own father. I can't stress that enough. Don't think necessarily in terms of your own father in order to understand what God is like, because earthly fathers fall short. I know mine did. When we think of what a father should do for his children, that's what Isaiah is looking for, for a Father that acts on behalf of those who wait for Him. And we wait trusting in Him in a way that maybe we've never trusted in our earthly father. We wait with confidence, trusting that He knows what is best for us and

that that “best,” whatever it is, will be ours. One way or another, if not today then tomorrow, if not tomorrow then the next day, if not the next day the next year, if not the next year many years hence and if not many years hence then for all eternity. One way or another that promise will be fulfilled. And that’s the message that the Child in the manger brought forth loud and clear. Born in what can only be described as the humblest of circumstances. Born and grew up in circumstances that we would never in a million years choose to grow up in. I can prove that to you. Let me ask you one question. How many of you, in order to grow up and become someone who the state wants to put to death, would grow up in utter poverty and never have access to a Smart Phone? How many of you would do that, besides my wife who doesn’t even know what a cell phone is? Every now and then I explain it to her and she says, “Aw, come on! That can’t be.”

The world, unfortunately, doesn’t see it that way. The world thinks that there are multiple ways of achieving the blessing that Isaiah is seeking here in this passage. The “all roads lead to the same place” idea. The “whatever works for you” idea. That’s what the world thinks. But we have a message for them. And Isaiah has a message that he speaks to God but that he also speaks to the world. “Since ancient time no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any god besides you.” Any at all!

Well, the third thing that Isaiah says – and this is actually about half of this passage – is that God Himself is calling us back to a relationship of faith, trust, love and obedience with Himself. Half of this passage is a lament for our sins. It sounds kind of like Romans 3. There are echoes of this in Romans 3 as well. When we continued to sin against God’s ways, He was angry. How then can we be saved? Sounds like the question the Philippian jailer asked in Acts chapter 16. What happens? There’s an earthquake, the mountain trembles. The building rumbles and the jailer falls on his knees and asks Paul, “How can I be saved?” Because he knows within the next minute he might come face-to-face with God. And he’s no happier about that circumstance than Israel would have been at Mt. Sinai. And of course Paul tells him what the answer to that is. But it’s a question that Israel asked as well. “How can we be saved?” All of us have become like one who is unclean. All of us! No exceptions! Doesn’t matter how old you are. Doesn’t matter how obedient you are to your parents or how well you treat your children or how good you treat your employees. All of us have become like one who is unclean. All of our righteous acts are like filthy rags. All the things that we think are good, that we do – while it’s true we would probably be better off doing them than doing stuff that we know for a fact is evil – even the stuff that we think is good is tainted. It’s corrupted. How many times have you given someone a handout? You’re just walking along the street and we’ve all encountered people with their hands out asking for money for a meal or whatever. A lot of the time we just walk past them and we feel guilty. So then the times that we actually give them something, why do we do that? Is it because of the glorious generosity that suffuses our souls? No, it’s because we don’t want to feel guilty. At the very least, there’s a little of that, right? You know, “I just can’t do this again. I can’t walk by this guy for the hundredth time and not do something for him. I’ve got to do something and I’ll feel better about it afterwards.” All our righteous acts are like filthy rags. We all shrivel up like a leaf and like it the wind sweeps us away. Isn’t that a marvelous image of people who think they’re the center of the universe and

yet they're no more important than the leaves that are even now still falling at the end of autumn.

“No one calls on Your name or strives to take hold of You.” We've all turned our backs, we've all gone our own ways. “For You have hidden Your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.” Something has to be done. In verse 8, Isaiah comes back to the Fatherhood of God and to that personal relationship He has with His people. And even as he offers up this lament for the sin of Israel – and for himself (you remember in Isaiah 6 he referred to himself as a man with unclean lips, a man out of whom evil poured through his mouth, through his tongue) – even as he offers up this lament, there's a plea for mercy and it's not, “Lord, give me mercy because if You do I'll give the rest of my life to You. If You do, I'll become a missionary to Guatemala. If you do, I will never ever beat my dog again (mutt!). If You do I will be a different person.” No, the plea for mercy is based on the character of God. “You are our Father. We're clay, You're the potter. We're the work of Your hands.” Think about that. Look around this room. Look at the person sitting next to you or in back of you or in front of you. Think of them as a work of God's hand. There may be some people here who you think, “I don't know that person from Adam.” But they're a work of God's hand. It might be someone worth getting to know. I've never said hello to that woman over there. I don't even know her name. It might be Elizabeth Taylor for all I know. But she's the work of God's hand. Isn't that someone worth knowing? Isn't that someone worth breaking bread with? One of the things that the Session has been talking about for the last couple of years has been the creation of a tighter, deeper community here at Faith. Imagine going into that with a mindset that says, “The reason we want to do that is not because we want to make our church bigger or better or anything, but because we want to know God's people better, because they're His.” Every single one of them.

He concludes this way: “Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD. Do not remember our sins forever.” And indeed, like a father, He doesn't. “Look upon us we pray for we are all Your people.” What a note to end that passage on. We are all Your people. Father, we're all Your kids and we know we've done some really rotten things. That's what children do sometimes. But we also know that with You, with Him, there is forgiveness, there's reconciliation, there's restoration and at the end there is not punishment or judgment. There's only love. That's what the incarnation was about. It was about God coming to us and saying in the most personal way that He could, “I'm your Father and I'm going to introduce you to your eldest Brother. Someone you don't know, you've never met. And He is going to make sure that you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are part of My family. That you are one of My children. That all of you who claim Him as Brother, you are all a part of that, you are all My people.”

This Advent take the time to speak to Him and say thank You. Thank You that He's made you a member of His family. Thank You that the way He did that was by sending your eldest Brother into the world to make that happen. Thank Him that because of what the elder Brother has done on your behalf. He sees all the bad stuff you've done and He forgives you and says, “Come back, My child.” Confess Him as Father. That's what Christians all over the world are doing today, following the proclamation of this word.