

Worth the wait: Isaiah 64:1-9

## Isaiah refuses to pretend anymore.

by [James E. Brenneman](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

On the last weekend in September, I walked into a department store and was blinded by the sparkle of Christmas lights, ornaments and lawn Santas. Apparently in the stores, the longer the waiting period the better: it means more sales, increased profits and hopefully more satisfied investors. The market can always come up with another sales gimmick to entice us into the Christmas spirit. In the church, however, we are more restless, more eager to get through the waiting period. We long for the advent of Christ.

The Advent prophet, Isaiah, expresses the frustration that many of his fellow believers feel after years in exile. They are longing for God to reenter their lives in tangible, this-worldly ways. It's been a long time since God sent pillars of cloud by day and fire by night. It's been a long time since God rained manna from heaven or sent plagues upon Israel's enemies. It seems to these Jewish refugees that God is no longer minding the store.

Isaiah refuses to pretend Advent anymore. Too many years have come and gone without a sign of God's presence. In blunt and violent terms, the prophet begs God to come out of retirement: "Tear open the heavens and come down," shake up the landscape with forest fires—enough to boil water. Make the mountains quake. Isaiah seems to be saying, "Don't just stand there silently, God. Do something!"

The prophet Isaiah also laments that in their waiting, the people are emotionally withdrawn and have lost their will to stay in touch with God, to walk anymore in God's ways. Why? "Because you . . . hid yourself, we transgressed." "There is no one who calls on [God's] name" anymore. Others have described the absent God as the *Deus absconditus* or "hidden God" who is the "Elusive Presence."

Have you ever felt like Isaiah or the people of his day, wondering where in heaven or on earth God is? Have you tried to pray and felt nothing, seen nothing, sensed nothing for a long time? Have you ever been ready to throw in the towel or felt the

sad weight of Bob Dylan's song, "Knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door," with no one answering? If so, you've entered Advent, when we cry out to God to "tear open the heavens and come down." We beg God to come down, to enter the public squares of life, to blast our enemies to smithereens, to holler into our existence with a cosmic bullhorn. We want a loud and noisy Advent.

But most often we get *Deus absconditus*, God who hides from us, whose presence is sometimes more elusive than we want it to be. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century, said of Christ's first Advent, "The Lord did not come to make a display. . . . God came to be made known according to our need and as we could bear it." G. K. Chesterton said, "God came down and slipped in the back door . . . to surprise us from behind, from the hidden and personal parts of our being . . . as if we found something at the back of our own hearts that betrayed us into good."

God sometimes chooses to enter our world in a barn at the edge of town. God breaks open the heavens and comes down through the back door of life's hovels. There Isaiah's prophecy came to pass. And here too, in a world gone awry, the prophecy of Isaiah still comes to pass. "We have all become like one who is unclean and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."

Some church traditions refrain from singing Christmas carols during Advent. Purple, the color of remorse, adorns the altar. It's a ritual warning us not to greet God prematurely or presumptuously—that is, at least not until we acknowledge that we are clay in the divine potter's hands, people chastened by God's silence, ready to be molded anew as the "work of [God's] hand."

Advent is mostly about a God who "breaks open the heavens and comes down," not stopping halfway. God in Christ comes all the way down to meet us in our sinfulness, down into a manger bed, down to the cross, down to the grave.

We spend too much time trying to work out the details of when and how Jesus will come again. In the process, we fail to grasp the truth that Christ has come not once, not twice, but hundreds of times as God-with-us, our Savior. The Advent of God happens every time we repent, turn from our sins and seek God's forgiveness. The hidden God, *Deus absconditus*, becomes God our Savior. Advent is worth the wait!