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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37  
Fading Like a Leaf

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me begin this morning's sermon with a lament from our First Lesson, from Isaiah 64:

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;  
(from Isaiah 64:6-7, NRSV)

Like you and me, Israel as a whole was capable of becoming discouraged and of doubting herself. In this passage, Israel says that she fades like a leaf. She is fading away, losing weight in this world, losing influence, losing significance. And she sees that she herself is to blame for her decline. She confesses her own faults:

...our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

Sometimes life catches up with us in such a way that we are led to admit our inadequacy – inadequacy not in this or that lightweight thing, but inadequacy in the *chief* thing, in matters of the integrity of life, in matters of eternity.

The Prodigal Son, for example, leaves home for that far-off land where he ruins his substance in riotous living.<sup>1</sup> He sounds like a headstrong and heartless son toward his old father. And yet, for all we know, this leaving of home might have followed some time of soul-searching in which the young man had said, “I just do not measure up to the standards of my father. I do not measure up and I have come to doubt whether I ever will. Worse, I have come to doubt whether I *can* measure up. So, I've got to go! I am fading away here. It is my fault, 'my own most grievous fault,' but I am suffocating and I know, I've got to go away!”

Well, if the Prodigal Son did not think such a thing, other sons and daughters have thought it. They are fading away, and though they might rant and rave about how unfair the world is and how mean people have been to them, in their heart-of-hearts, they blame themselves. They repeat Israel's old lament:

...our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 15:11-32

They are not proud of their iniquities, they would be glad to forsake them, but they have failed so many times in the past, they have become discouraged and they have come to doubt themselves.

Indeed, such doubts about one's own character are not that strange for any of us. As devastating as the opening words of our confession are, they nonetheless strike many of us as being true:

- ☐ Most merciful God,
- ☑ we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.  
We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone...

In a way, this is one of the most terrible things we could say about ourselves: that “we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” When life works out that such a confession is no longer an abstract confession, but one which is felt deep in the heart, with a most personal appropriateness, then one has arrived at the depths Israel has fallen into in this morning's First Lesson.

## **TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS**

So, Israel does something radical in this First Lesson. She cries out to God to intervene in a most remarkable way – a way that, if it should come true, would disrupt the very fabric of reality:

<sup>1</sup>O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence — (Isaiah 64:1,  
NRSV)

Israel! Do you know what you are doing? Do you understand what you are praying for? Why, if the very mountain would “quake” at the presence of the Lord, surely you, yourselves are going to quake as well. Think back to your ancestors, to that ancient generation that withdrew in fear when the Lord descended on Mt. Sinai:

<sup>18</sup>And all the people saw the thunders, and the lightnings,  
and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and  
when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off.  
<sup>19</sup>And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will  
hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die. (Exodus  
20:18-19, KJV)

But now life for Israel has reached such a pitch that she longs for something drastic. It will be frightening, yes, for God to tear open the heavens and come

down, but “Come down, O Lord. Come down!” It is as if Israel is saying, “Anything is better than these mediocre, disappointing, sin-filled ways in which we have been proceeding. Something *has* to change! It would be better for the Lord to come down and set things right, as frightening as that will be.”

## **FATHER**

How can Israel do this? How can she have courage to cry out to the Lord that he would rend the heavens and come down? The answer is to be found in our text. It is in that little word so very full of meaning — Father. After she has confessed her self-doubts and iniquities, she is comforted to use that good word “Father”:

<sup>8</sup>Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
<sup>9</sup>Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,  
and do not remember iniquity forever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.

So it seems to have been with the Prodigal Son. Life became so hard for that young man that he reached that blessed bend – the moment when, as the text says, he “came to himself.”

<sup>16</sup>And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. <sup>17</sup>And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! (Luke 15:16-17, KJV)

The young man had no way of knowing for sure how his father would receive him. Perhaps the old man would scorn him and reject him and send him packing. But somehow, the Prodigal Son did not believe that he would be treated in such a manner. There were many things he did not know as he turned around and headed for home. But this much he did know: that he was returning to his “father,” and that should always be a reason for some hope in this world.

## **THE SEASON OF ADVENT**

Advent is that season of the church year when we should try to identify with weary Israel and with the Prodigal Son eating husks of corn along with the pigs. Advent is the season when it is okay – indeed when it is true wisdom – to admit that neither the world nor we ourselves are right. Advent is the season when we admit that this world and we ourselves could really use some help here. And Advent is the season when we are open to anything, any disruption of reality, so long as it comes from the hand of our Father.

One way to think of this morning's Gospel Lesson is that it is asking us to *always* be Advent people. And so, Jesus bids us to continually be awake and ready for his return:

<sup>35</sup>Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup>or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup>And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. (Mark 13:35-37, NRSV)

The people of God should never really settle down and say that “all is well with my soul.” We should never rest content with a world in which there is so much hunger, so much poverty, so much violence and suffering. We should continually long for God and his ways. An echo of Israel's cry should find a place in our hearts too:

<sup>1</sup>O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence — (Isaiah 64:1, NRSV)

## **A BAPTISM**

Now, here at Immanuel, we are about to witness something very important and dramatic: We are about to witness the very moment when one of us is awarded the right, before all of earth and all of heaven, to address Almighty God as our “Father.” I mean little Grayson Dean Tota, whose baptism we are about to celebrate. When Grayson is baptized, he thereby becomes a “child of God.” It thereby becomes his right and joy to refer to God as “Father.”

And this, in turn, we hope and pray will be the great background of his life henceforth. Who knows how life will work out for young Grayson? Who knows how life will work out for any of us? We might reach the depths of self-doubt that both Israel and the Prodigal Son reached. But if so, we want Master Grayson to always know that he can turn around and come home, for he is coming home to his Father.

And if this old world is getting him down, he need never despair, for one day the Lord is going to “rend the heavens and come down,” and though the mountains will quake at his presence, and though we too will quake at his presence, at least the One at whose presence we quake will be our Father, and that is a good thing. That is a reason for hope that can never be taken away from us. And to this Father, together with the Son and the Holy Spirit, be the glory now and forever. Amen.