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

My sermon this morning is based on the heartfelt cry we hear in our First Lesson. And so, this is from Isaiah Chapter 64. The words are addressed to Almighty God and they go this way:

1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...
(Isaiah 64:1, NRSV)

This is the cry of a people who have exhausted all other means of support. The universe is empty of help unless the LORD should help them. Look to the right, look to the left: none of the ordinary means of help will suffice.

There is evil out there in the world — not only in ancient Israel but also today. Why, people carry rifles into quiet churches¹ and mosques² and kill everyone in sight. There is trouble without and trouble within. Sin still clings to the human heart, even the heart of the people of God. And so it is that Christians across the land fall on our knees at the start of the liturgy and willingly confess once again:

We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done and by what we have left undone.

Both without and within, things are not entirely right in this world. Even people of goodwill, who have been trying with all their might to live decent lives and to make the world a better place, sometimes feel overmatched by this world’s troubles and join Israel’s ancient lament:

1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...
(Isaiah 64:1, NRSV)

You come down, Lord, lest we perish! You rend the heavens and come down, for we are not enough. We are not going to be able to turn this ship around. We are drifting evermore toward violence and unfairness. People are losing heart. People are losing hope. We sense danger up ahead, and we are not

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutherland_Springs_church_shooting
confident that we are up to the task of dealing with this danger. So, you, Lord: you rend the heavens, come down, and help us.

There is a certain prayer request I sometimes encounter at my Pastor’s Booth out there on the sidewalk by our church. It is a prayer request I take most seriously. It is a request for prayer by someone who is struggling at work. New Yorkers are a confident bunch—if you look at them striding along the sidewalk. But some of them, I do believe, are awfully worried about their jobs. Some of them worry about the future of their job, because the economy is always shifting, and an industry that seemed solid in the past might by fragile nowadays. So there is that — worry about the future of the industry. But sometimes I encounter a different kind of worry — a more personal kind of worry. The person at my booth – that dear person – is not so much worried about the industry, but rather about his or her own competence for the job. Is he overmatched? Has she taken on more than she can handle? Wouldn’t it be great if the big boss would suddenly appear in the doorway and reassure the worried one? “You are doing a great job. Thank you!” we could imagine the boss saying. Or, “You are doing a great job. But maybe you would be glad for some more resources to help you with your job. If so, I am here to help.” And so it is that the one who stops by my booth is sometimes worried about work in a way that requires help beyond what the person himself or herself can do. She needs the boss to appear and to help. He needs the boss to appear there in the doorway.

Multiply such worries a billion times, for there are many, many troubled hearts on earth, and you can well imagine all of humanity joining the ancient lament of Israel:

1O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...

(Isaiah 64:1, NRSV)

Israel’s particular trouble in today’s Bible reading is that her hopes and dreams have come true, but they turn out not to be enough. Israel had languished in Babylonian captivity for nearly two generations, hoping and praying to return home to Jerusalem and the land of Judah. Well, so it has happened. She has in fact been released from Babylonian captivity and has gone home. But things still are not right. The people face ruin, conflict, and famine. Life is downright disappointing. And so, Isaiah phrases their lament for them: O, Lord, come and help us. Tear open the heavens and come down!

Now let us notice two things about Israel’s lament. First, Israel admits that she somehow deserves the disappointment she feels. And second, Israel also admits that it is going to be a scary thing for the Lord to rend those heavens and come down to earth. Let me briefly speak of these two things.

First, Israel admits she bears blame for her sad state. She bears blame not simply for this or that miscalculation. Rather she bears blame because she has
departed from the ways of her God. A holy life was available to Israel — available to both the rich and the poor. But she departed from the ways of her God. And so Israel’s lament includes this confession:

6 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. (Isaiah 64:6, NRSV)

It is but honesty to make such a confession. All we like sheep have gone astray. It is the beginning of health to confess that we have departed from the will of the Lord and bear responsibility for it.

Perhaps my second point is related to this first one. My second point is that Israel admits that she is praying for a scary thing. She is praying for her Almighty God to come down from heaven to her on earth, but she is also mindful that she has sinned. That means that she, the guilty, is praying for an encounter with her Maker and her Judge. That is bound to be exciting. That is bound to be frightening. And so we hear Israel speak of quaking mountains and fire and trembling nations:

1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence —
2 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!
(Isaiah 64:1-2, NRSV)

Here we have praiseworthy reverence and fear before the living God. The saying of the apostle is true:

31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:30-31, RSV)

Ancient Israel’s sense that the appearance of the Lord is going to stir things up and to be frightening is also appropriate for us Christians in the modern world. Day by day we pray “Thy kingdom come,” and surely it right for us to do so. And yet the coming of that kingdom is an awesome thing. We should not be too casual about it, but rather try to live a life preparing for that awesome encounter.

This all puts me in mind of a delightful passage in C.S. Lewis’s The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. I mean the passage in which Mr. and Mrs. Beaver tell
the four children about the mighty lion Aslan, who represents our Lord Jesus Christ. The great conversation goes this way: (Lynnae Douglas helps us with this dialogue.)

“Is—is he a man?” asked Lucy.

“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor—beyond-the-Sea. Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh!” said Susan, “I’d thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver; “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; “don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

And so it is that Israel yearns for the Lord to rend the heavens and come down, but also Israel knows that this will not be entirely safe: It will be good, but also it will be a matter of mountains quaking, nations trembling, and you and me wishing that we had not sinned so much — I am quite sure of that. There are better ways for us to use our time than sin. Our neighbor waits for our love and our help.

To complete the drama of Israel’s lament, let us note her final appeal to her Maker. She knows that she is guilty, for she has departed from ways of the Lord. And she knows that it will be a scary day when the Lord rends the heavens and comes down to earth. She knows these two big things. But she is brave and goes ahead and appeals for the Lord’s mercy. The final verse in our reading goes this way:

Be not exceedingly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity for ever. Behold, consider, we are all thy people.
(Isaiah 64:9, RSV)

In this way, Israel is bold to remind the Lord of his covenant with the people. Israel reminds the Lord of his age-old love and mercy:

Behold, consider, we are all thy people. (Isaiah 64:9, RSV)

It is the best Israel can do, and I believe she has done a beautiful thing in this lament. The Lord will certainly cherish these words and have mercy on all his people. If not today, then one day, for sure.

What a great cry Isaiah gives us at the start of this Advent! It is a cry of yearning for God and for his kingdom. O that you would rend the heavens, Lord, and come down! We need Jesus to come again, for we are not doing all that well on our own. It will be frightening when he comes again in power and glory, and we will be found guilty in many ways before him. But come Lord Jesus, come! (Can I get an Amen!)

Christmas, which is not all that far off now, is the beginning fulfillment of Israel’s cry. On that first Christmas, Almighty God did rend the heavens and come down — down all the way into a manger.

Leonard Klein, who used to be one of the pastors here at Immanuel, makes an interesting note in the Lectionary Commentary on this morning’s Gospel reading from Mark 13. That Chapter 13 is an apocalyptic passage. It speaks of the darkening of the sun, the stars falling from heaven, and the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory (Mark 13:24-26). Leonard points out that as a matter of early church history, St. Mark certainly knew that Jesus had not come again quickly. A generation had passed since Jesus spoke of the darkening of the sun, the falling of the stars, and of his return. A generation had passed, but the kingdom had not yet come. But, Leonard observes, St. Mark is entirely at ease with the delay. So was St. Paul. The delay in the Second Coming of Jesus gave space and time for the life of St. Francis and St. Augustine and Mother Teresa and you and me. As for St. Mark and St. Paul and the other apostles, they are confident that the kingdom will in fact come. They are sure of that because the coming of the kingdom has already commenced, in an irreversible way, in the resurrection of Jesus.

Meanwhile, how are we to conduct ourselves? While we wait, what are we to do? Jesus himself gives us the answer:

And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. (Mark 13:37, NRSV)

That is, live for Christ day by day. Love God and love your neighbors with all your heart. Do not fall asleep on the job. Do not become drowsy in your love, nor preoccupied with worldly concerns. Treat each day as if it is the day deserving of Jesus’s return.

There is a story of an eclipse in colonial New England during which state legislators panicked and several moved to adjourn. But one of them said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be
fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought!"\(^4\)

Jesus solved many sorrows and conflicts in the past. We can trust him to do so again. Meanwhile let’s live for him day by day, as long as life lasts. Let us live for him and join the ancient cry of old: Rend the heavens and come down again, Lord Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

\(^4\) My wife, Carol, told me this story from her reading of a commentary on \textit{Mark} by Lamar Williamson, Jr. Interpretation Series.