

First Sunday in Advent November 27, 2011

Isaiah 64:1-9 "Awesome Things When Christ Comes Down"

I'm always fascinated with stories people tell about going to heaven and coming back again. Earlier this year, I read "Heaven is for Real," and now I'm reading another book, "The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven," in which a six-year old boy goes to heaven and meets Jesus face-to-face after his spinal cord was severely damaged in an automobile wreck. Before these books became popular, I've heard for many years, just like you have, about people who have made similar claims when they were in critical condition – sometimes telling about the gates of heaven, about a bright light they saw, and about people they saw who were already dead. Even in the Bible, St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians and told them about a man he knew who went up to the 3rd heaven and heard inexpressible things.

I don't know what to make of these stories. The book I am reading now is about the experience of Alex Malarkey, and I might be tempted to think the whole story is a bunch of malarkey, even though on the cover it reads, "A true story." But how can we be sure? It is natural for us in our fallen, sinful nature to be fascinated by such stories, but also at the same time to be skeptical about things we don't understand. I do believe the Biblical account of the man who went up to the 3rd heaven, so maybe these other stories are true, too. These stories just don't come from my own experience.

These stories can help us look forward to the gift of heaven that awaits us, but eventually we must come back down to earth and put our trust in what we know and believe to be true from God's Word. Ask yourself, where do you meet God today? The truth is that when we have an encounter with God today, it is not that we have gone up to him. Rather, it is because God has come down to us. And when God does come down, as Isaiah writes about in the Old Testament reading today, awesome things happen. I can't wait until Christ returns and comes down from heaven. What an awesome day that will be. Imagine that, Jesus coming back down for you and me!

But let's come back to earth for a moment. We live in a world where problems and conflicts challenge the faith of individual Christians and the Church. We've witnessed natural disasters that have upturned people's lives and left them with nothing. We've known people who have fought serious illness and did not survive. We've experienced changes in our economy where employment is not always a sure thing, where raises do not come, where savings are depleted, and retirement plans and financial security are uncertain. We've even heard of people in our own time who are persecuted for their faith in Christ and have lost their lives because of their faithful witness, and we ourselves have experienced persecution for our faith, but without the fear of losing our life over it. It's true that our faithful witness to Christ can bring criticism, rejection, or condemnation. We want to give a faithful witness, but sometimes we remain silent and afraid. At such times as these, our own trials or tests might even lead us to question our faith in Christ.

As much as we love this creation, our families, our friends, our church, and everything else good that comes with life in this world, there are some things in life that we find unpleasant and seek to avoid, but some unpleasant things in life are unavoidable. At such times, our cry goes up to God with Isaiah, "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down!" We want to look upon God with our own eyes. We want the troubles of this world to go away. We want our enemies to see that our witness and faith in Christ are true. We read how wonderful heaven and eternal life are supposed to be, and we want the

peace and contentment that come with Christ's return. We want Christ to come now. How awesome that would be!

The people of the Old Testament knew God's awesome presence. When Israel was in slavery in Egypt, God came down and rescued them. He led them by pillars of cloud and fire and brought them to the Promised Land. Along the way he provided them manna and quail and water. He protected them from their enemies. He came down on Mount Sinai in fire and smoke and made the mountain shake with his presence as he confirmed his love for them and gave them the 10 Commandments. He came down in a cloud and filled the tabernacle they moved with them throughout their wilderness wanderings. When they finally settled in the land, God filled the temple in Jerusalem with his presence. When the enemy nations surrounded and attacked Israel, God himself went out with the people and defeated their enemies. When he sent them into exile in Babylon because of their idolatry, he brought them back again to settle in the land. Again and again the people of Israel witnessed God's awesome presence.

However, there were also times when God's holiness required he bring judgment on Israel because of the nation's sin. So Isaiah confesses the sin of the people, just as we do today. He confesses that God is justified in his anger over our sins. Just like Israel, we've been in our sins a long time – in fact, our entire lives. Sometimes Christians focus only on the actual sins that they have committed that separate them from God. However, the Bible makes it clear that we are all sinners from the time we are conceived in our mother's wombs. We inherit the original sin of Adam and Eve and come into this world spiritually dead and separated from God's holiness. We would be lost forever unless God intervened to save us.

God's awesome presence can bring judgment on the sinner, but his presence is not just about his power. God's awesome presence is also seen in his love and grace. When God came down in Jesus Christ, his awesome presence healed our sin. Christ's saving love led him to take our sins on himself at the cross where God hid his face from his beloved Son. After his death on the cross as our substitute, God raised his Son from the dead. Our enemies of sin, death and the devil were overthrown at the cross, and we now live in the entire forgiveness of our sins. We are saved through our awesome Savior, Jesus Christ.

Now God comes down to us in his Word and Sacraments with his awesome presence. This is the only place where God promises to show himself to us today. We might get a peek of heaven someday while living in this life, but we can be sure that God will always meet us in his Word. There God speaks to us and reminds us that he is our creator, he loves us, he will provide our daily bread, he will protect us from our enemies, and he forgives us from our sins. Just as he once created these awesome bodies in which we live and breathe, he also recreates us in holiness through his Word to live according to the commandments, to give a faithful witness to Christ, and to watch for Christ's awesome return.

Just as God comes to us in his Word, Christ comes to us with his body and blood when we eat and drink at the table of the Lord. This is the same body and blood that went to the cross for our sins and that rose from the dead. It is the body that ascended to the right hand of God. And it is the same body that we will see face-to-face when he visibly returns on the last day to embrace us with a big smile and open arms.

God gives us his Word and Sacraments to use until Christ comes again.

When God comes down, awesome things happen. It was that way for the people of Israel when God saved them from their enemies and dwelt among them in the temple. It was like that when Christ came down and became our Savior. It is like that every day when God comes down to us in the Bible and the

sacraments to speak words of tender love and forgiveness. And one day we will look in the eyes of our awesome God when Christ returns.

soli deo gloria