

“WHERE IN THE WORLD IS GOD?”

Isaiah 64:1-9

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

November 29, 2020

I'm not a regular viewer of the TV quiz show, *Jeopardy*, but this program has been on my mind since the recent death of its long-time host, Alex Trebek. *Jeopardy* has always been unique among quiz shows because contestants reveal their knowledge by thinking backwards. They are first given answers and then phrase their responses in the form of questions.

This sequence may strike us as unusual, but it's actually a useful way of arriving at truth – even religious truth. A Christian musician once wrote a song entitled, *If Christ Is the Answer, Then What Is the Question?* That in itself is a good question. Christians claim to have answers to the big questions of life; but what questions are we claiming to answer? Are they important questions, questions anyone is seriously asking?

To illustrate my point, let's play an imaginary round of *Jeopardy* here in church this morning. The category is “The Christian Year,” which gets off to a new start today on this first Sunday of Advent.

The answer is: Pentecost. We press our buzzer and come up with the correct question: “On what day was the Holy Spirit poured out on the early Church?” So far, so good.

The next answer is: Easter. The correct question is: “On what day was Jesus Christ raised from the dead?” So we go on to the next square.

The third answer in this category is: Christmas. Of course, the correct question is: “On what day do Christians celebrate the birth of Christ?”

We're on a roll! This seems to be an easy exercise, and we're already racking up a lot of money! But before we run to the bank prematurely, we need to think again. The questions we've supplied accurately identify the facts about our major Christian celebrations; but they don't tell us much about their underlying meanings. Why did certain biblical events become such a cause for celebration in the first place? What are the deeper questions they are trying to answer?

So let's go back to the celebration we are now rapidly approaching. The answer is: Christmas. If you think the question is, “When we do have our biggest orgy of spending and eating?”, you would be right about our consumer culture but flat-out wrong about our religious reasons for observing Christmas. If you think the question is, “When do Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ?”, you would at least have your facts straight; but even this does not get to the underlying spiritual question that Christmas answers.

We've arrived at Double Jeopardy, where the stakes are at their highest. One more time – the answer is: Christmas. The true question is: “Where in the world is God?” Are you surprised? This question may not seem like an obvious match to the answer we've been given, but it does tell us why Christmas is so important, and it tells us everything we need to know about the season that leads up to Christmas, which we call Advent.

The prophet who speaks most powerfully from the Advent perspective is Isaiah. This prophet hails from the time when the people of Israel have been freed from captivity in Babylon and have returned to their native land, their promised land. Their godforsaken period of exile is over; it's homecoming day in Jerusalem! – more joyous than any homecoming on a college campus or a family Thanksgiving.

But Israel's homecoming proves to be a major letdown. Imagine that foreign authorities force you to leave Woodbury and live in a faraway place for several decades. When you finally come back, you find your house or apartment in ruins, your schools and businesses in ruins, and, yes, your white, tall-steepled church in ruins. This is what the people of Israel find when they return home – utter devastation. Their familiar landmarks are gone; their places of habitation are gone; their sources of livelihood are gone; and most painfully of all, their place of worship, the temple, is gone. Without all the usual signs of God's grace and favor, and especially without their house of worship – the sacred space where they routinely meet God – they ask a question they never thought they would be asking: "Where in the world is God?"

Notice: for Isaiah, the accent in this question falls on the words "in the world." The prophet does not question God's existence; what he questions is God's presence. He knows precisely where God is: God is enthroned in heaven. The problem is, "God's in his heaven and all's not right with the world." What Isaiah yearns for is a sign of God's presence here on earth. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence . . . to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!" (Isaiah 64:1-2).

Don't miss the fact that this is the same Isaiah who, as a young man, has a vision of God in the temple. God is present to him in a dazzling sound and light show. But here in today's text, Isaiah is an old man, and this God he once encountered so vividly is now absent and silent. The prophet reminds the Almighty of the "awesome deeds" of deliverance God has performed in the past (v. 3). But God now seems to have run out of tricks, or gotten mad and turned away from God's chosen people, or perhaps lost interest in them completely. The distance between heaven and earth has become infinite. Isaiah is asking, in effect, "Where in the world is God?"

Lest we forget, the season of Advent struggles with this question. The Scripture lessons of Advent struggle with this question. In other words, people of faith struggle with this question – not just agnostics or atheists, not just skeptics or scoffers, but people who know their Bible, who attend religious services, who confess God with their lips and serve God with their lives. People like you and I also ask, "Where in the world is God?"

Now, it's not that we ask this question all the time. We do enjoy seasons in our lives when God's presence is palpable, when God's activity is visible – in the glory of a New England autumn, in the cry of a newborn baby, in the lyrics of a beloved hymn, in the hospital room of a family member, in the company of mourners at a funeral home, in the solitude of our own prayer closet. But even in these times and places, God remains a mystery. God's presence in the world is not clear and obvious like the first snow of winter or the face of a friend.

Do you remember the series of children's puzzle books entitled *Where's Waldo?*, created by the English illustrator Martin Handford? The books consist of detailed illustrations depicting dozens or more people doing a variety of amusing things at a given location. Readers are

challenged to find a character named Waldo hidden in the group. It's not easy to do, which is why these illustrations are called "puzzles." Well, in a world that is cluttered, chaotic, and sometimes ugly, spotting signs of the presence of God can be just as challenging as spotting Waldo! Where is God when a pandemic paralyzes the people of the earth? Where is God when George Floyd cries out, "I can't breathe"? Where is God when you or someone you care about is diagnosed with COVID-19 or cancer? Where is God when you are home alone, eating on a TV tray watching *Jeopardy*, separated from your loved ones?

In our better moments, you and I may still trust that God is there, even when we can't see God's face or feel God's companionship. But we also experience seasons in which God seems to be hidden from our sight altogether, as if God has chosen to go into hiding. Isaiah and the people of Israel find themselves in such a season. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" This is the anguished outburst of a desperate people who have given up on polite, respectfully restrained prayers to God. People on the bottom, people who have lost hope in conventional means of change, do not have the luxury of a Deistic God, a God who merely sets the world in motion without continuing to show up and act decisively in the world. They want God, and they want God now.

Do any of you know what that feels like? Have you ever prayed but felt like you were only talking to yourself? Have you ever stood beside the bed of someone in pain and prayed for God's help but felt like God was far away? The great preacher Fred Craddock, who spoke marvelously for God, once confessed, "My problem with God has been God's timidity, God's quietness." If someone who daily communicates with God, who speaks for God, says that God is timid and quiet, how much more must it be for the rest of us. Toward the end of one of his movies, Woody Allen says something like, "It's not that I hate God. I have nothing against God. I think that the worst you could say of God is that God is an underachiever." A lot of us may be thinking the same thing but are afraid to say it out loud. In our minds, God never quite lives up to God's potential. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

Advent reminds us of an inescapable truth: God is there, even in our darkest moments; but more often than not, God is standing in the shadows rather than appearing in broad daylight. Therefore, we have to look toward the shadows to see. If we look directly into the sun, we will only be blinded. We must see the sun indirectly, in the sun's reflection. Maybe this is how you and I are meant to see God – through reflections and shadows.

Advent also reminds us that we have to look at our shadowy world with eyes of faith. Some folks see events through the eyes of faith, and some don't. We observe this pattern of seeing and not seeing again and again in the Bible. Some observers see the miracles of Jesus, and do not say, "He must be the Messiah," but rather say, "What gives? How did you do something like that?" Saul of Tarsus sees the resurrected Christ on the Damascus Road in a flash of blinding light, but those who are with him apparently see nothing. Rarely is God obvious, even in the dramatic stories of revelation in the Bible; God is only visible to those who have their eyes wide open.

Why does God communicate this way? We all have moments when we, like Isaiah, wish that God would rip open the curtain of heaven and come among us in an irrefutable earthquake or fire, with such undeniable clarity that that any fool would say, "Yep, that's God." But such moments are few and far between, even for people of faith like Isaiah. Why? I don't know, unless

it is because our God is a free, unrestrained God, not some tame house pet on a leash who comes at our every beck and all.

So maybe this is why the Church, in its wisdom, observes the season of Advent in the weeks before Christmas. In our holiday game of *Jeopardy*, we're tempted to rush ahead and focus on the answer: "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2: 11), but forget to identify the question it is meant to answer: "Where in the world is God?" Advent calls us, even forces us, to linger with this question. If we are to see the fragile light that dawns upon us in Christ, we must sit awhile in the darkness. So let me ask you: what could you do (or, perhaps more to the point, what could you avoid doing during this Advent?) that would make you better able to see God's subtle incursions among us?

My maternal grandmother loved to tell the story about her eccentric female cousin, who was childless, coming to see me when I was a newborn. In a moment of brutal honesty and perhaps with a tinge of jealousy, this cousin observed to my mother's mother, who was brimming with pride and joy over her baby grandson, "Beverly, he looks like any other baby to me." Well, I probably did look ordinary, perhaps even homely. But as we all know, when it comes to babies, "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder." I dare say that when many people first see the babe at Bethlehem, they see only another poor baby. Yet for those who are leaning toward the light, they see Immanuel, God with us.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," begs the prophet. But the free, living, loving God rarely does. More often, God comes to us in a glimpse, a shadow moving in the darkness. And we, whose lives are so full of sights and sounds, lights and thunder of our own creation, may miss heaven's opening up for us.

"Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus."