

Advent Hunger—Isaiah 64: 1-9¹
(December 3, 2023-1st Sunday of Advent)

There is a French saying, very much befitting that culture's passion for cuisine; "A good meal begins with hunger." It's true, isn't it? Food is so much more satisfying when you're hungry. If it's something made for you, the hospitality so much more appreciated, I think. It's a helpful way to look at the season of Advent which we begin today, a time of preparation for the coming of God into our midst, for the revelation of Christmas where Love takes on human flesh. It's helpful I think because if Christmas is to be satisfying, if it has any hope of filling us up than we need to find our hunger for this Holy meal.

It's a hunger reflected in our faith story. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down..." the prophet Isaiah beseeches God on behalf of the Hebrew people newly returned from exile to a destroyed Jerusalem, a destroyed temple, trying to find their footing in this familiar, yet unfamiliar place. We are lost, come among us like you once did at Sinai, God. A good meal begins with hunger.

You might be thinking, what a strange place to begin the countdown to Christmas, after all aren't Advent calendars filled with chocolate. But here's the church, out of step as usual. Unable to catch the spirit of the season, swimming against the contemporary current, the church is all gloom and doom. You won't find Isaiah 64 as the basis for a Christmas advertising campaign. The world wants Christmas jingles, and the church sings a lament! The world has visions of sugar plums dancing in its head and the church sees only a confused and lost people wailing toward heaven: "O if you would tear open these heavens and come down."

Too often lately I feel I've said something like that. One of the things that happens when your church becomes known for sponsoring and supporting people who are refugees is that you get a lot of requests from desperate people. I was relaying one of these requests I received to Nancy Dykstra and Sheila Rule, who've been so involved in this ministry, last week and they mentioned how it happens all the time and how hard it is to say you just can't help. "O that you would tear open the heavens..." in Gaza, in Ukraine, at Victoria and Weber streets. Have you said or thought something similar in your life, where the hunger is so deep for hope? I remember when my oldest was in hospital, having been diagnosed with a brain tumour, how every act of support and presence took on such significance and easily brought me to tears, a prayer shawl, a gas card, childcare help. The hunger was deep, I was looking everywhere I could for the nourishment my soul needed. When the meals appeared, I devoured them.

The writer C.S. Lewis said, "The Christian faith is a thing of unspeakable joy...But it does not begin with joy, but rather in despair. And it is no good trying to reach the joy without first going through the despair." Because then it's not really joy, it's more like a self-satisfaction, a contentment born of having it all together and God is more like a lucky talisman that ensures it will always be so. It is to be so filled with the empty calories of Advent chocolate that there is no room for the nutrient rich Christmas feast. A good meal begins with hunger.

The movement from Advent to Christmas is the movement from despair to joy. If you're hungry enough for the Holy, for Love you'll go looking almost anywhere. You'll keep your eyes open for nourishment in the most unlikely of places. Even in a stable, to a child born under the yoke of empire to poor refugee parents. A good meal begins with hunger. Our Advent journey begins.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

¹ This reflection relies heavily on the work of William Willimon and his article *Going Against the Stream*, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/going-against-the-stream/>