

Advent alchemy: Isaiah 64:1-9

What is the need for which I need Jesus to come?

by [John K. Stendahl](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

“Stir up your power O Lord, and come . . .”

This traditional prayer for the First Sunday in Advent begins with abrupt and urgent entreaty. There is no delay for caressing words of prayerful invocation; rude as a wakening alarm, we call for God to get moving. The collect for the following week will pray for God to stir up *our* hearts, but now, first, it appears to be the sluggishness of *God’s* heart that is in question. It is God’s Spirit that first needs stirring to action.

If Advent prepares us for some fresh coming of Christ—at this year’s Christmas and/or in that larger future whereby we reimagine our present—then it is a time to acknowledge more deeply the ways that we need God’s anointed to come. Lighting our candles, we see ourselves again as dwelling in darkness. Despite all the lights and noise of Christmas commerce, the world is cold and in need. God is not here. Not yet, not enough.

Isaiah prays, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence!” If only the heavens would open wide and we would see God’s overriding majesty, God’s justice and grace revealed to us and to all this sorry world. If only the firmament were rent and goodness poured down into the midst of our lives. If only all that is wrong with this world could be burned away and God’s children vindicated and restored.

But the heavens do not open. Not that way. Beneath the firmament, history continues to play out its recurrent ancient tragedies. We ourselves recall seeing the sky’s lovely ceiling change to horror and then descend in choking clouds of dust. Even when gazing into a starlit night we see no heaven revealed on the other side. The stars are not benignly glittering angels. The firmament is not a thin shell but goes on and on into infinite wastes and countless indifferent galaxies. Even in their clarity, the heavens are as opaque as those over Golgotha, where Jesus could no

longer find the God to whom he prayed.

Yet even now we are not so different from the prophet of old, nor from Jesus or Paul and all the others who have prayed this way before us. We address the silent heavens and call on the distant Lord whom we cannot see. We urge on the God who seems so slow. Faithfully, like those before us, we enter once again into the drama of yearning and waiting.

Why? What's with this double make-believe that pretends both that we are now waiting for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem and that we really expect the heavens soon to open and reveal the Messiah "coming in clouds with great power and glory"? Why again these candles and this ritualized longing? After all this time under an unbroken firmament, would not existential resignation and humane ethical resolve be more honest and ennobling?

I suspect that we choose to enact Advent's longing partly because it is preparation for whatever good will come in the holiday ahead, a practical delay of gratification in order that we might be hungry for the feast. Perhaps we can even succeed now in readying ourselves in such a way that what we anticipate will come with the power of something unexpected, a surprise after all.

In addition, it may be that we value the faithful make-believe of Advent simply because hope is sweet and despair is bitter. Indeed, perhaps we have found in the season's mood of anticipation the first, even the best, gift of Christmas, the one we get to open early.

I tell myself also, each Advent, that there can be something ethically and spiritually edifying about this exercise, this taking care to note the shape of the darkness in which our candles burn. What is the need for which I need Jesus to come and the hurt I want him to heal? Where is the light most needed? If the heavens do open at Christmas, where and with whom will I hear the angels sing? Such inquiries may be helpful, individually and communally, even if nothing stirs above us.

But now I think that there is a mighty human solidarity at stake here as well. I cannot help joining Isaiah and Jesus and Paul and all the rest of them, longing for the heavens to open, for justice to come for the living and the dead, for mercy to make right this damned and beloved world. I will not choose indifference or resignation. I want to be among those who watch and hope, even when the hope feels like despair. It is after all the company in which God chose to be enfleshed, in Jesus,

praying to the still unanswering sky.

And perhaps God did then stir in the heavens, unseen above Golgotha. Perhaps those heavens opened for shepherds to hear a song of peace one night, and later on so that the Holy Spirit could attend a baptism at the Jordan River. And perhaps they will at last open for everyone, that every eye may see.

And then sometimes, some blessed times, we have had worked in us such Advent alchemy that our own hearts stir to feel the stirring of God. Not yet so powerful, not yet quite visible, but more, we think, than just imagined. While the sky still appears opaque and silent, seeds quicken in the dark soil. A child stirs in the womb.