

**WATCHMEN WHO PRAY FAITHFULLY AND FERVENTLY FOR THE
RETURN OF CHRIST****Sermon for 1 Advent, 2020****Isaiah 64:1-9**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the First Reading read before, Isaiah 64:1-9: **¹ If only You would tear the heavens apart and come down! If only the mountains might quake at Your presence, ² as when fire sets dry twigs ablaze, or when fire causes water to boil! Come down to make Your name known to Your enemies, that the nations may tremble in Your presence! ³ When You did awesome things that we were not expecting, You came down, and the mountains quaked at Your presence. ⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard or perceived with his ears, and no eye has seen any God except You. You act on behalf of the one who waits for You. ⁵ You have been coming to meet him who gladly does what is right, and those who remember You according to Your ways. Look! You have been angry; we have been sinning against Your ways for a long time. Therefore shall we be saved? ⁶ All of us have become like something that is unclean, and all our righteous actions are like a filthy garment. All of us have withered like a leaf and our wrongdoings carry us away like the wind. ⁷ There is no one who calls on Your Name or rouses himself to take hold of You. For You have hidden Your face from us, and You have made us melt because of our wrongdoing. ⁸ Nevertheless, LORD, You are our Father. We are the clay, and You are our Potter. All of us are the work of Your hand. ⁹ Do not be extremely angry, LORD! Do not remember wrongdoing for ever! Indeed, please look! We are all Your people.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

In the ancient world, large watchtowers were placed overlooking fields of growing crops, where, in the weeks when the crops began to ripen toward harvest, men would stand watch, guarding the fields from animals and thieves. With the

community's basic food stores at stake, the watchman's role was critical to the townspeople.

We also find several references in Scripture made to watchmen who stood atop city walls in times of uncertainty to survey the scene outside the fortifications. The watchmen were situated on a spot from where they could monitor the approaches of any enemies coming toward the town. If a threat appeared, a warning would be sounded, and the town would shut its gates to prepare for battle.

You can also imagine the watchman standing vigil at other times, observing the daily life of the city. He could see much of the activity in the streets and markets. He knew the people, their work, their habits and their lifestyles. If his position was near the city gate, he could also observe the business of the city made by its officials.¹

The Scriptures also use the role of a watchman to describe the work of prophets among God's people. In Old Testament times, when God had a message for the people, He would deliver it through one of His prophets, and often the prophet would then speak to God on behalf of the people, praying on their behalf.

This morning, Isaiah offers us the prayer of a watchman. The watchman on the walls of the city of Jerusalem would have had a splendid view of this beautiful city. It has an imposing palace, an expansive temple, and all of the splendor, wisdom, and power that the queen of Sheba herself had come to see.² *That* Jerusalem would be a city worth saving.

This Jerusalem, however, is different. It is desolate. That's what Isaiah calls her. Isaiah foresees Jerusalem *after* the fall of the Southern Kingdom. She has been gutted of her inhabitants by war. Some have fled to Egypt. Others have been taken as exiles to Babylon. Those who remain are few and poor. Jerusalem was now desolate, and God had become the Israelites enemy.³ So why would a watchman stand on the walls of that city? What is there to protect? Who even cares?

¹ Ruth 4:1-12

² 1 Kings 10

³ Isaiah 63:10

Listening closely to Isaiah's prayer, we soon come to understand that the watchman isn't talking to the people; he's talking to the LORD God. The watchman isn't waiting for enemies; he's waiting for God. Isaiah has stationed watchmen to stand there, in the midst of destruction, remembering God's promises, because those promises change lives.

The LORD God invites us to be His people who acknowledge our sin and hope for salvation from Him. He forms us to be people who pray faithfully and fervently.

Sadly though, in times of trouble, it is easy to fall into the language of blame. We only need to look all around us today. Look at all the trouble life brings. Who causes all of the trouble we are experiencing? Blame is thrown around everywhere, and even the church is not immune. "It's never my fault. It has to be someone else's." When trouble arises, people look for someone to blame.

Isaiah knows that after Jerusalem has been destroyed and Israel is taken into exile, God's people will be tempted by the language of blame.

He lets us overhear the prayer of those who would blame their enemies for this destruction. The watchman cries out for God to "**come down to make Your name known to Your enemies, that the nations may tremble in Your presence!**" After all, these are the ones who have destroyed the Lord's own sanctuary and afflicted His people.⁴ Isaiah asks the question, "*Despite these things, LORD, will You restrain Yourself? Will You keep silent and oppress us very severely?*" (64:12)

Isaiah also lets us overhear those who would blame God for the problem. He writes, "⁷ **There is no one who calls on Your Name or rouses himself to take hold of You. For You have hidden Your face from us, and You have made us melt because of our wrongdoing.**" The LORD God had also made them to wander from His ways and hardened their hearts so that they no longer feared Him.⁵

⁴ Isaiah 63:18; 64:11

⁵ Isaiah 63:17

In the end, however, the watchman uttered a prayer of faith. It is not the enemies' fault. It is not God's fault. It is our fault, for we have sinned, and the watchman cries out, **“Therefore shall we be saved?”**

In the context of that heartfelt repentance, the watchman remembers the promises of God. **“8 Nevertheless, LORD, You are our Father. We are the clay, and You are our Potter. All of us are the work of Your hand.”**

It's not easy being a Christian. Today, Christianity is constantly under attack. No one likes being attacked, and so discipleship is difficult. If you want proof of that, then look around you, because it is happening here today. The world has so much to offer, and it is much easier to live for the world, than to be a disciple of God. So many of our own who have been instructed, who have confirmed their faith as youth, have walked away from the church as adults. A promise to remain faithful to God has been made, but now seems forgotten. Besides, there's so much more to do on a Sunday than to go to boring old church, to hear the pastor ramble on about the same old thing. Many would rather go shopping, or just sleep in because they got home late from a party or had a heavy night on the drink. All this is far more appealing to the flesh than coming to church for an hour or two each week to worship God and be served by Him.

No, it is not easy being one of God's disciples, in fact, it can be a struggle, and all this struggling can lead to blame – blaming others for the state we now find ourselves in.

All this blaming can lead to gossip, a breaking of the Eighth Commandment, and so, as the world looks in, they overhear our conversations, and we don't sound like a people confessing our sin. No, we sound like a people condemning the sins of others, a people quick to blame others and slow to confess our own sins. Suddenly, to the world, the church looks like a place of hypocrites: people who think they are better than others, fueling hatred toward the world.

How good it is then that Isaiah has stationed a watchman on the walls of fallen Jerusalem to teach God's people to pray! His words call us to repent of our sins and to come before God as a people filled not with hatred but humility. It's true, **“6 All of us have become like something that is unclean, and all our righteous actions are like a filthy garment. All of us have withered like a leaf and our wrongdoings carry us away like the wind.”**

How good it is that Isaiah has stationed a watchman to cry out to God, because even today, his words remind us of our hope. God is our Father. He created us, and when we fell into sin, He promised not to abandon His creatures. In sending His only Son to die for our sin and to claim us as His own, God became our Father – **“We are the clay, and (He is) our Potter,”** and even now He sends His Spirit to bring us forgiveness and to fashion us as a new people in Him - a people who pray faithfully and fervently.

Today, Advent begins... *again*. The fact that Advent begins *again* is troubling. Christ has not yet come. The lack of Christ’s return causes some to scoff about the validity of Christianity. The Apostle Peter tells us that *“in the last days mockers, following their own evil desires, will come with their mockery⁴ and ask, “Where is the promise of His coming? For, since the fathers fell asleep, everything has remained as it has been since the world was first created”* (2 Peter 3:3-4). Are we a people who cling to superstitions and old gods? Perhaps we should just give up on a religion that has caused so much war and bloodshed in the world. It is hard for God’s people to remain fervent in prayer. It is hard now, and it was hard then.

Isaiah foresees a coming time when some in Israel will stop calling on God. The war and desolation have taken their toll, leading some to believe that God is not the answer. As Isaiah says, **“⁷ There is no one who calls on Your Name or rouses himself to take hold of You.”** What is a watchman to do?

Some would say the watchman should start issuing commands to the people, telling them to pray more fervently, but Isaiah knows better. Faith is not a matter of our own working, rousing ourselves up to believe in God. Faith is the work of God. It comes by the power of the Spirit as God makes promises to His people.

So, the watchman that Isaiah stations on the wall does something simple and yet profound. In the midst of the desolate landscape and the fallen city, he remembers the promises of God. He recalls the deliverance from Egypt, the marvelous things that God did. **“⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard or perceived with his ears, and no eye has seen any God”** like this. He is the one who **“acts on behalf of the one who waits for (Him).”**

Is your prayer life impoverished? Don’t go out and buy another book on prayer. Listen to the promises of God. God’s Word inspires prayer by bringing us His promises. When we hear what God has accomplished, we begin to long for what

God will do. When we look around at a world in need, we look beyond that world to God, who “**acts on behalf of the one who waits for (Him),**” and pray that He would “**tear the heavens apart and come down.**” We turn to God in prayer that is faithful, confessing our sin, and prayer that is fervent, looking forward to the fullness of our salvation.

Isaiah’s watchman stood on a desolate city and prayed, and his prayer continues to speak today. People today are tempted to call the church “desolate” and “no longer sought after.” Can you overhear the conversation? “*I was raised in the church, but as I grew older, I just stopped going. It’s funny, but I don’t really miss it.*” It’s not hard to find those who have left the church. They could be in your family, among your friends. They are definitely there outside these doors.

Today, God calls His people to be watchmen. Those who continue to pray for His presence in this world pray faithfully, confessing their sins before God and trusting in Christ for their forgiveness. They pray fervently, longing for the return of Christ and the dawn of a new creation. “*Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!*” (Mark 11:9-10). Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Almighty God and Father, we thank and praise You for Your promises of mercy and deliverance, which You have fulfilled in the coming of Your Son Jesus Christ. He is indeed the Light to reveal You to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.

As Your faithful people in every age have believed Your Word, grant that we, too, may believe it, and one day inherit Your heavenly promises. As Your people of old looked forward with longing to the coming of the Messiah, grant that we, too, may joyfully welcome Jesus into our hearts, and be saved by Him from the power of sin, Satan, and death.

Lead us by Your Spirit to a deep awareness of our need of repentance. Teach us to hate what is evil and to love what is good. Strengthen us when our enemies try to lead us into sin. Direct our lives in ways that are holy and right, that we may serve and glorify You in all things.

Cause Your saving light to shine in all corners of the earth, that people everywhere may know Your love in Christ Jesus, and join that great number of Your people who say: “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

Grant peace to the nations of the earth. Look with special favour on our own country, and on all its citizens. Guide all who rule over us, that they may learn to know You as the only true God, and may seek to do Your will in all things.

Bless all who have gathered in Your house today to hear Your precious Word. Grant strength, comfort, and understanding to those who are sick or troubled, to those who are sad and depressed, to those who are enduring hardships, and to all others who are in any bodily or spiritual need. Grant them perseverance, and the joy of Your abiding presence.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who has come to deliver us, who has died to save us, and risen to justify us, and who is always alive to intercede for us. Amen.

1st Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9

¹ If only You would tear the heavens apart and come down! If only the mountains might quake at Your presence, ² as when fire sets dry twigs ablaze, or when fire causes water to boil! Come down to make Your name known to Your enemies, that the nations may tremble in Your presence! ³ When You did awesome things that we were not expecting, You came down and the mountains quaked at Your presence. ⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard or perceived with his ears and no eye has seen any God except You. You act on behalf of the one who waits for You. ⁵ You have been coming to meet him who gladly

does what is right and those who remember You according to Your Ways. Look! You have been angry; we have been sinning against Your Ways for a long time. Therefore, shall we be saved? ⁶ All of us have become like something that is unclean and all our righteous actions are like a filthy garment. All of us have withered like a leaf and our wrongdoings carry us away like the wind. ⁷ There is no one who calls on Your Name or rouses himself to take hold of You. For You have hidden Your face from us and You have made us melt because of our wrongdoing. ⁸ Nevertheless, LORD, You are our Father. We are the clay and You are our Potter. All of us are the work of Your hand. ⁹ Do not be

extremely angry, LORD! Do not remember wrongdoing for ever! Indeed, please look! We are all Your people.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

³ Grace and peace to you from God, our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ!

⁴ I am always thanking my God for you for the grace of God, which has been given to you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ For in Him you have been made rich in every way, in all speech and all knowledge, ⁶ just as the testimony about Christ has been confirmed in you. ⁷ Therefore, you do not lack any charismatic gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will also make you firm until the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God, who has called you into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ “However, in those days, after that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. ²⁵ The stars will be falling from the sky; and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ Then people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then He will send the angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the farthest

part of earth to the farthest part of heaven.

²⁸ “Learn this parable from the fig tree! When its branch has already become tender and it puts out leaves, you know the summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things happening, you know He is near, at the doors.

³⁰ “Truly, I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until these things all take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but My Words will certainly not pass away.

³² “No one knows about that day or hour, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

³³ “Beware and be on the alert! For you do not know when the time will be. ³⁴ It is like a man who was away on a journey. When he left home, he put his slaves in charge, assigned each one his task and ordered the doorkeeper to keep watch. ³⁵ Therefore, keep watch! For you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at the time when the rooster crows, or early in the morning. ³⁶ Make sure that, if he comes suddenly, he does not find you asleep! ³⁷ What I tell you, I tell everyone: ‘Keep watch!’”