

*Awestruck*  
Isaiah 64:1-4,8

The Psalms say:

*Heaven is declaring God's glory;  
the sky is proclaiming his handiwork. (Psalm 19:1)*  
*You [God] visit the earth and make it abundant,  
enriching it greatly  
by God's stream, full of water...  
Drenching the earth's furrows...  
you soften it with rain showers;  
you bless its growth.*  
*You crown the year with your goodness...,  
The hills are dressed in pure joy.  
The meadowlands and the valleys...  
they shout for joy;  
they break out in song! (Psalm 65:9-13)*

Yes; everywhere we can see the glory of God, God's creativity. It's visible in the beauty of creation. It's a balm to our weary souls, isn't it, to think about gentle rain, to see the brilliant colors of fall.

But this also is the God we have experienced in nature this year. [images of this year's extreme weather]

Who is this God? And where was that good, gentle, healing God in 2020?

Let's just say it straight out: This year the world is *not* OK. It's been a terrible year. Even people who *never* think about biblical visions of apocalypse have wondered this year if the confluence of a pandemic, extreme weather, a political crisis and orange sky might signal that the end times are actually upon us. That God is coming back to punish us. Or maybe to save us. Or maybe it's that God is leaving this planet that humans have been wrecking for a long time. Or maybe God has left us already.

The truth is, we don't know what God is doing. The poet Walt Whitman said, "I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least." I often feel that way. Maybe you do too.

I think that's what Isaiah must have been feeling when he spoke those words we heard a few minutes ago. Isaiah's people lived in a terrible time. They were far from home, in exile from everything that had been familiar to them. It was like they'd lost the thread that connected them to the good life that they *knew* God had wanted for them, made for them. This was their version of 2020, except they'd been in it for years. They too felt afraid and exhausted. They too weren't

sure if God had gone into hiding, or if God was never coming back. Whether they should act faithful and wait patiently; or whether they should just give up and look elsewhere for something to save them.

Isaiah put words to the people's disorientation. *Tear open the heavens and come down!* he pleads with God. Because isn't that what God's supposed to do? Put things right again? Where was God? Why wasn't he here, where he was needed?

But desperation drives us to honesty. And so Isaiah also told the truth about the people. *You were angry when we sinned; you hid yourself when we did wrong.* We might have done a few things to upset you, God. Is this why things have gone so wrong? Are you *never* coming back? In the words of the Psalmist, *How long will you be angry with your people's prayers?* (Psalm 80)

Here we are now, thousands of years later. These days we tend to believe that the earth operates by laws of science, not actions of God. Raging forest fires and too many hurricanes are the consequence of climate change, *human* damage to the earth. People suffer from injustice and inequality because *we* have let our racial wound fester for generations. Thousands of people are dying every day from a virus because *someone* did not not address it early enough. But really, when we are as desperate as we feel in 2020, when the power of even our immense technology cannot give us the right answers, how different are our prayers from those ancient people's?

This is terrible.  
We don't know how to fix it.  
Make it end.  
Please, God.

Just like them, we need the good, loving, for-us God to show up, and to stay. To bring goodness, healing, order. To restore our lives.

One Christmas Eve when I was little, just four or five maybe, my family was at home in our little house in North Hollywood. There were other people there—grandparents, aunts and uncles. It was getting late, and no doubt my parents were having a hard time getting me to settle down and go to bed. I was dancing around the living room when a big sound came right out of the fireplace. "Is Kathi Tcherkoyan asleep yet?" it asked in a deep, loud voice. Santa Claus was on the roof, and if I wasn't asleep, he would probably skip right over my house and not leave any gifts! I ran straight into the room I shared with my little sister, jumped into bed, laid very still, and closed my eyes as tight as I possibly could. It was my dad, of course; when none of his first-resort parenting techniques worked, he'd climbed up on the roof and shouted down the chimney to get my attention. That worked.

The theme of our worship this Advent season is *Awestruck*. It's about wonder; being still enough to notice that we are in the presence of something much, much bigger than us; seeing that the world holds the possibility of a miracle at any moment. Awe is the kind of amazement that makes us stop to take in a breathtakingly beautiful sunset or a whole sky full of stars. But awe is also standing in front of a fire no one can stop. It's watching a virus run faster than the

development of a vaccine. It's conceding that racism is so deeply embedded in our 'normal' that we don't begin to know how to dig it out. The truth is, we can feel an awful lot like fear. So this year, maybe it's good news for us that we've remembered what fear feels like.

Every year, the stories we tell around this time remind us that Advent begins in darkness. Waiting. Not knowing how things will turn out. Not knowing when God will come again, or even *if* God will come again. Most years, I think, it's hard to get ourselves in that posture. We already know the end of the story. Our lives are too good to anticipate anything other than abundance. Darkness and waiting are generally not what strong, capable people have to worry about. They're certainly not what we look forward to. Even in the church and the faithful family I grew up in we didn't pay a lot of attention to Advent. We went right from Thanksgiving feast to Christmas consumption. One full season to another; there was no hunger in between.

This year is different. Maybe this year we can feel it deep in our bones: the darkness, the unsureness of waiting for something we don't understand, something we can't control. Maybe this year we will really get it, that praying for God to '*tear open the heavens and come down*' is dangerous business. That praying like this invites into our orderly, pattern-seeking lives a God who cannot be regulated, who is beyond predictability. Maybe this year the Christmas story, God coming to live right here in this banged-up world with us, will surprise us; make us open our eyes a little wider, and shape our mouths into an O, and fall on our knees in astonishment at the not-to-be-taken-for-granted fact that we have made it this far, and the promise that this God will never abandon us.

A poem written by Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

*The door to the locked attic room in our hearts  
that we have ignored for too long swings open,  
and its great emptiness reaches for us.  
This is the season we marry our longing.*

*Nothing will do now, but divine intervention,  
yet not in the heavens, but somehow—  
in a mystery the prophets have hinted at—  
among us.  
The empty place is the place of God.*

*Oh, humanity, set the table,  
and keep the fire going.  
But before you set out either to hope or to rectify,  
your faithfulness now is to attend to the great, holy fullness  
of the emptiness in your heart,  
and be still.*