



# Sermon Growth Guide

**November 29, 2020**

**Wonder – Heaven Torn Open**

**Isaiah 64:1-9**

**Key Verse:** Isaiah 64:1

“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!”

**Big Idea:** Jesus breaks down the barrier of sin that separates us from God.

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## Foundations

The ancients thought the sky was an impenetrable dome. Aristotle thought we were at the center of a series of spheres holding all the planets and stars in place. Even though NASA had launched plenty of things into space and Yuri Gagarin had been up there and back, it took no small amount of courage for Alan Shepard to strap into the nosecone of Freedom 7 on May 5, 1961, and launch into outer space. Little did he know he would eventually play golf on the surface of earth's moon.

Isaiah cast his eyes up to the stars. He looked up at the sky. Isaiah knew the distance between God and mankind. He understood the impenetrable barrier of sin. How can we be in relationship with a Holy God when our sin separates us from Him? No chance. But what if God breaks the barrier? What if God reaches out toward us? What if God finds a way into our very lives and souls? “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!” (Isaiah 64:1)

And then, one day, God did. This is the Wonder of Christmas.

Gathered together with your circle, in-person or online, open your time of study in prayer. Ask the Spirit to guide and guard your thinking and growing.

## Understanding God's Word

What is Isaiah's great desire in verse 1?

In verse 6, how is sin personified? What do we learn about the consequences of sin from this passage?

What appeal is offered to God for mercy in verses 8 and 9?

## Applying God's Word

Isaiah exclaims in verse 5 that “You (God) come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways.” How can you better “remember the ways of the Lord” in your daily comings and goings?

How can your small group support you in your relationship with the Lord this week?

## Witnessing God's Word

Think of someone near you who does not yet know the mercies of God. What barriers stand in their way? Give thanks to God that He “rends the heavens” in Christ Jesus and makes a way for His people. God is a barrier-breaking Savior, alleluia! Commit to joining God in His loving pursuit of the person you're thinking of by continuing to pray for this person and making one more action step toward them this week.

Well, friends, today is the day. It's finally here. Every year, we lean in ahead of time—we long for the wonder of the Christmas season to begin! We all try to hold off, but it's not easy. This year especially. How many of you had your tree up long before today? We started listening to Christmas music about two weeks ago. Decorations? Did they go up earlier than usual? Understandable!

The First Sunday of Advent is here. And it couldn't have come soon enough. The wait is over. And do you know what we do now? Yes, that's right! We wait some more. Advent is a season of waiting. And today the official waiting begins. It is a time of hopeful and expectant waiting. With our brothers and sisters across the globe, the church enters the season of waiting for the birth of Jesus. It is indeed the most wonderful time of the year.

Today we begin by hearing the Word of God through the prophet Isaiah. For the birth of Jesus was long foretold before it happened. It was not an afterthought of the living God. It was always God's good plan to save us.

Isaiah 64:1-9

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains would tremble before you!

2 As when fire sets twigs ablaze  
and causes water to boil,  
come down to make your name known to your enemies  
and cause the nations to quake before you!

3 For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,  
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

4 Since ancient times no one has heard,  
no ear has perceived,  
no eye has seen any God besides you,  
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

5 You come to the help of those  
who gladly do right,  
who remember your ways.  
But when we continued to sin  
against them,  
you were angry.

How then can we  
be saved?

6 All of  
us have  
become  
like one  
who

is unclean,

and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;  
we all shrivel up like a leaf,  
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

7 No one calls on your name  
or strives to lay hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us  
and have given us over to [b] our sins.

8 Yet you, LORD, are our Father.

We are the clay, you are the potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
9 Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD;  
do not remember our sins forever.

Oh, look on us, we pray,  
for we are all your people.

The Old Testament prophets were the mouthpiece of God to the people of God. They called God's people back to relationship with the Lord. They spoke harsh words and probed the future with powerful visions. Isaiah, often called the prophet of holiness, was set aside for his prophetic task in a moment of devastating recognition of his own sin and the absolute holiness of God. Through poetry, prose, pictures and visions, Isaiah preached the destructive nature of sin and pointed to a holy God who would rescue His faithless, unresponsive and stubborn people.

As we come to Isaiah 64, we find Isaiah in the middle of a passionate prayer. Israel is in captivity once again—this time under the Babylonian Empire. Isaiah pleads for God to look down on His people, to come to them like He did in the Exodus, to shake the mountains again like He did then, to pour out rescue and strength. At the same time, Isaiah pours out his grief over the sin of the people—they are unclean, their acts are like filthy rags, they have forgotten God and God has given them over to their sin.

At the moment we crash into this prayer, Isaiah (I imagine) throws up his hands with great emotion and great inspiration knowing that there is only one way for this whole mess to be fixed...

"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!" – Isaiah 64:1  
Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down.  
Oh that you would rip open the heavens and descend.

And in one heartfelt moment, Isaiah adds an aggressive picture to our Christmas litany of images. Right next to angels singing, shepherds hurrying, stars shining, and snow falling ... we see the sky being ripped apart



... heaven torn open. It's a violent image, a ferocious act, a fierce intrusion. Isaiah touches a nerve. He exposes the depth of our dilemma. Sin is no small thing. And the remedy for sin would have to be uncompromising.

### An Unexpected Entrance

In Jesus' birth, God tears through heaven and comes down—much like a little child tears into the wrapping of a present on Christmas morning—maybe that is the simple reminder of what God is doing at Christmas.

Isaiah asks the question “how can we be saved?” The only answer is—God must tear through the heavens and come down. Underneath the beauty and loveliness of Christmas, God rips open the separation between God and humankind. And Jesus comes.

In this passage Isaiah pleads with God to do once again “awesome things we did not expect” (verse 3). Christmas is one of those moments where God does something no one expects. What Isaiah prays for is another Exodus moment, the moment when God came down on Mount Sinai, covered it with smoke and fire, and “the whole mountain shook violently”—we read in Exodus 19. Now, that was amazing, Lord! Do that again!

God would eventually answer Isaiah's prayer, but not quite in the way Isaiah imagines. God's answer is to tear heaven open, but God does not come as an earthquake or a mountain shaker—rather he comes as a tiny, helpless, vulnerable infant lying in a manger. God comes as a whisper. “How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.” And we wait on the Lord for His gift.

Interestingly, it's the prophet Isaiah himself who can help us handle this paradox: of violent tearing and vulnerable birth. In chapter 9 of Isaiah, “for to us a child is born, a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.” The great joy of the nation, the ending of the battle, the light of the whole world will begin with a baby. Isaiah has already imagined this moment.

The image of heaven torn open is  
a powerful picture—hold onto it.  
Sometimes pictures push their way  
deep into our hearts, awakening  
wonder and  
longing. The  
sacred

work of the imagination is to see things as “they should be” not merely as they are. Today I want to share three images from Isaiah 64 that help tell the story of this chapter—common images that I think can help us as we faithfully wait for the coming of Jesus.

These are Isaiah's pictures that spill out in this prayer moment.

### Image Number 1—An Image of Certainty

As when fire sets twigs ablaze  
and causes water to boil ... Isaiah 64:2

The first image is what I call Isaiah's ‘image of certainty’—the image of fire, and what fire does to wood and water. When fire comes in contact with dry twigs, they will burn up. That is a certainty. When a pot of water is set over a fire, the water will boil. I left a pan of water on the stove just last week, turned the burner on, and promptly forgot I had done it. The water not only boiled, it disappeared ... and then the pan began to burn. I called home frantically when I remembered, and found out that Adam had saved the pan when he began to smell it burning. I was frustrated, but I was not surprised. There is no mystery in these metaphors. It is a certainty that fire will burn things.

As fire will certainly burn sticks and water, so Isaiah is certain that God can rend the heavens and come down to us. God can rip open the sky and enter our world. God can tear through anything that separates us from His presence. God is the great barrier breaker—nothing can stand in His way. Of this, Isaiah is certain.

What are you certain about this Christmas? Certainty is hard to come by right now. What will happen with school? Will I be able to see my friends and family for Christmas? What will happen if I get sick? Will our business survive another shutdown?

Isaiah's image of fire, wood and water challenges us to rest our hope on what is certain. And the one certainty Isaiah has to stand on is that God can get to you and me. Do you know that? Do you believe that? Do you believe that God can tear through the complexities of your life and find you right where you are?

It doesn't matter what  
you've done, the

mess you are in, how broken you are or how distant you feel from God. Christmas is about the certainty that God closes that distance, that God tears through the vastness that isolates you from Him and finds you.

### Image Number 2—An Image of Separation

Here's a dry, shriveled leaf. A withered and faded leaf. In autumn, the leaves fall, they dry up and are blown away. Or we rake them up and dispose of them. They are lifeless, dead, brittle, their time is over. This is Isaiah's image of separation.

Here are his words:

"... we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind, our sins sweep us away." – Isaiah 6b

Isaiah's picture of what sin does to us and what it is doing to God's people is contained in this leaf. Eugene Peterson uses the phrase "sin-dried" to describe what happens to someone separated from God by sin. Sin dries up our lives and decays our existence. Separated from the giver of life, we shrivel up and are swept away. Our souls become thin, fragile and dehydrated. It's a far contrast from just a few chapters earlier where the Spirit of the Lord enlivens His people and they are called oaks of righteousness displaying the Lord's splendor (Isaiah 61).

Isaiah has walked with the people of God through four different kings and for more than 40 years. He has watched God's people disobey, pursue other gods, sin against God and neighbor, and then come back to the Lord only to fall into sin again. It's a cycle they cannot break open or exit on their own. We can't break the cycle either.

If you are at home today, you can probably look out your window and see a thousand leaves right out front. I think this image of a dried-up leaf is so perfect for how sin works. You spend hours raking up the lawn. The leaves are gone. It so satisfying—and you wake up the next morning only to find another blanket of leaves covering the front yard. Over and over we go through this exercise ... that's the fall, my friends.

American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a short story called *The Christmas Banquet*. In it, an old man dies and

leaves in his will that his fortune should be used to throw a grand Christmas meal every year for the 10 most miserable people to be found. The two stewards in charge of the task must find those 10 people every year—and bring them to a wonderful, luxurious banquet. The odd thing is that every year, one particular man is always invited—yet he doesn't seem unfortunate or needy or miserable at all. Gervayse Hastings is his name. He has all the comforts of life, and he is quite merry every year. It's baffling to the guests why this man is invited each year. Finally at the end of the story, the man himself reveals his plight—he is unable to feel hope or fear. He has no ability to embrace an afterlife or to connect with others at a human level. Let me just say—this is not the story to read on Christmas Eve ... it's a reflective and melancholy story (very much in the vein of a Hawthorne story). But the point is clear. In Isaiah's words, Gervayse is a shriveled leaf, a dried-up soul ... and at the end of the story he is simply swept away.

Isaiah grieves over the lifeless, listless withered people of God. Maybe you are entering this season of Advent in a fragile and dried-up place. The reality is that we cannot heal ourselves. We cannot reattach to God on our strength. At Christmas, Jesus comes to end the separation, to be born into our world. And we sing, "Be born in us today."

Each of the Gospel writers makes it clear how we enter relationship with God: "repent and believe," proclaims Jesus. "For the Kingdom of God has come near." Isaiah's own repentance shows us the simplicity of owning our own sin and becoming aware of the Lord: "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5).

The Psalmist puts it even more simply (116:4):  
Then I called on the name of the LORD:  
"LORD, save me!"

Maybe that is your Advent prayer—"Lord, help!" Rest assured that when we call for help, the Lord tears through all the barriers, all the darkness and comes to help.

### Image Number 3—An Image of Belonging and Beauty

Which brings us to our final picture, our final image for today. Here it is. A potter shaping his or her clay. It is Isaiah's image of belonging and beauty. To be saved means to belong to God. And belonging to God is



about our lives becoming a thing of beauty  
in the potter's hands.

Isaiah reminds God who God is: "Yet you,  
Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are  
the potter; we are all the work of your hand"  
(Isaiah 64:8)

We have been created by the hand of God  
to remain in the hands of God. We are God's  
workmanship; we belong to Him. You have  
not only been fearfully and wonderfully  
made (as the Psalmist sings), but you are  
being fearfully and wonderfully made ... your  
whole life is the artwork of the living God.  
Sometimes we have to wait for the beauty to  
emerge from the cold clay.

This pandemic has caused all sorts of  
disruptions in our lives. Sickness, death,  
separation. And not just here, but globally  
... it has put strain upon our understanding  
of our own belonging. Thanksgiving  
tables that are normally full of people who  
belong to one another—friends, family,  
new relationships ... pared down to smaller  
numbers. We've all made the best of it, but it  
represents nine months of strained relational  
connection, limited physical touch, and we've  
even lost the warmth of the smile. Many have  
lost much more than that.

What could God be making in our world?  
In our lives? Where will the beauty emerge?  
What is He forming in your life? In our life  
together? Where is God making beauty?

I don't know for sure, but a potter makes  
beautiful things out of slabs of clay. He  
forms, he fashions ... sometimes he starts  
over. But rest assured, the master potter  
keeps his hand on the clay and makes  
beauty.

Perhaps what is most important for you  
this Christmas is to be reminded that God is  
making something beautiful with your life.  
Maybe you are already starting to see it.

Three images from Isaiah:

- The igniting fire of certainty
- A shriveled leaf of separation
- A potter and his clay

Which image helps you to engage with  
God in this time of waiting? Which  
picture resonates with where your  
heart is? Which  
illustration  
causes

your heart to stir and wonder ...

- Are you in need of an anchor point, a  
certainty that God is near? Put a pot on  
the fire and watch the water boil. Jesus will  
come.
- Are you aware of your endless striving to  
manage your sin and try and do better ... but  
you find your soul brittle and breaking apart  
like a dry leaf? Ask the Lord for help.
- Are you searching for the beauty of God's  
work in your life—and you need the Lord to  
give you a glimpse of the beautiful vessel  
your life is becoming?

Wherever you are, the Lord is coming ...  
breaking through the barriers to find you.  
Ripping apart the heavens to get to you.  
Light the candle of faith today, put your trust  
in God's promises and step back in wonder  
and amazement. The wait is worth it.

Jesus is coming.

Amen.