

Too Big a Mess

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Advent 1B

Isaiah 64:1-9: Mark 13:24-37

At my last church we used to put up a tree just before the First Sunday in Advent. Not a Christmas tree, mind you, but a *Chrismon* tree, decorated with symbols of the Christian faith—crosses and crowns, lions and lambs, Alphas and Omegas. Charles and Margaret Williams would always get the tree when they visited their vacation home up in the mountains, and it was always a big, beautiful tree that filled the sanctuary with the smell of evergreen.

It was a tree just like that that they put up on a Saturday morning in late November one year. They and some of the members of their Sunday school class decorated it with hundreds of Chrismons and blown-glass balls and tiny white lights and long strands of beads and on top of the tree a lighted angel with moving wings that was just beautiful enough not to look tacky. By the time I got to the sanctuary on Saturday afternoon to practice my sermon the tree was fully decorated and firmly in place. Firmly in place, I say, because I tried to move it.

I noticed that one branch of the tree was sticking out in such a way that it would poke our pianist in the back when she sat down to play. I thought if I could move the tree back just six inches, it wouldn't poke her, and everything would be fine. So I got down on my hands and knees and saw that the tree was standing in a base that looked as if it would slide easily across the carpeted floor. I flopped down on my belly and took hold of the trunk of the tree and slid it ever so gently away from the piano, inch by inch across the carpet, and everything was going fine until I felt the tree's center of gravity shift, and felt the trunk in my hands begin to

tilt toward me, and saw one leg of the base start to bend, and that's when I knew that it was too late, that the tree was falling and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

It went over with a tremendous crash, with the sound of glass balls breaking and beads popping and limbs cracking and all of it right on top of me. When I crawled out from underneath the tree I saw Chrismons and beads and broken glass balls everywhere. There was a big puddle of water on the carpet, pine needles on the floor, the angel had flown off the top of the tree and landed in the aisle with its skirt over its head and there, on the fourth pew back, was a small, brown lizard that must have traveled with the tree all the way from Western North Carolina. I saw at once that I had made a mess bigger than my capacity to clean, and so I left it just as it was and went to the phone and called Elaine Austin, the chair of the sanctuary committee.

"Elaine," I said. "This is Jim. I've just knocked over the Chrismon tree in the sanctuary and I don't see any way I can get it cleaned up before tomorrow." There was a long silence on the other end of the line and then she said,

"Don't touch anything else. I'm on my way."

And within thirty minutes she was there with her daughter Andrea and they went straight to work. They got the tree back up, sucked up the water and the needles and the broken glass with a shop vac, secured the top of the tree to the walls on both sides with invisible fishing line, and then began to redecorate it carefully, lovingly, until it was just as beautiful as before. The angel, with her skirts smoothed down and her dignity restored, hovered proudly over the tree with her wings moving slowly back and forth.

I don't know what became of the lizard.

To this day when I think of salvation I think of Elaine and Andrea Austin coming to my rescue, and mopping up a mess bigger than my capacity to clean. It's the kind of thing the prophet Isaiah is talking about here in chapter 64. God's people have made a colossal mess of things. Their righteousness, as he says, is as "filthy rags." They have been carried off to exile in Babylon as punishment. And now he wishes—he prays!—that God would "tear open the heavens and come down" to rescue them. And not only in Old Testament times, but in every time since then, the people of God have been hoping that he would come down from heaven and set things right. What is obvious in all of this is the truth that human beings are capable of making a bigger mess than they can clean up, that they all need help from God, and that truth may have never been more obvious than it is right now.

Look at the mess we've made of things! Look at the scattered pine needles, and broken beads, and shattered glass balls of the human condition. No matter how hard we try we can't seem to make or keep peace with each other—new wars break out every day. The gulf between the fabulously rich and the desperately poor seems to get wider and wider. We can't seem to protect or preserve our environment from climate change. The culture is glutted with violence and cynicism. No matter how much our politicians talk about cleaning everything up we know in our hearts that it is beyond their power or ours. It's going to take something bigger than political action to make things right in the world. It is going to take the power of God.

And not only in our public life, of course, but also and perhaps especially in our private life, because we have made a mess of things there, too. We have failed at relationships that should have been the crowning glory of our lives.

Things between us and our parents, our children, our siblings, our spouses have become strained to the breaking point, and beyond. Some of us have suffered embarrassing academic and professional failures. Some of us have suffered business or financial failures. Most of us, if we are honest, have come to that place where I was on that Saturday afternoon in November: standing there looking at the colossal mess we have made of things and knowing in an instant that it is beyond our capacity to clean.

And that's when the cry of our hearts becomes the cry of the prophet Isaiah: "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" It is the sentiment of the Season of Advent, that time of year when we long for and pray for the coming of Christ. If anyone can clean up the mess we have made, he can do it, and so on the First Sunday of Advent in particular, we turn our eyes to the heavens and hope. We begin to talk about the Second Coming of Christ.

In ancient Greek drama there was a device that came to be known as the *deus ex machina* or "the God from the machine." When there was a crisis in the drama too complicated to solve, the playwright would have an actor in the role of a god lowered onto the stage with the help of an elaborate contraption rigged with ropes and pulleys. The god would then proceed to set everything right in the mortal world, solving the problems and rescuing the characters from certain death. The term *deus ex machina* is still used in literary criticism for those cases where an author uses some improbable (and often clumsy) plot device to work his or her way out of a difficult situation. The poor family suddenly inherits a large fortune. The cavalry comes charging over the hill. Superman swoops down out of the sky. George Bernard Shaw disapproved of such contrived and artificial endings. He said that it was much more tragic (and therefore much more realistic)

to leave characters to “wither in their bonds.” But perhaps those endings are most realistic that acknowledge our inability to get ourselves out of the messes we’ve gotten into, that tell the truth about our sin.

Is there anyone here who has never needed help? Anyone here who has never messed things up so badly that it was beyond your capacity to make them right again? Anyone here, in other words, who has never needed to be saved? We all need help. We need it individually and we need it collectively. As individuals we have messed up our own lives beyond our capacity to clean. And as a whole we have messed up the world in a way that it cannot be easily fixed. If this were an ancient Greek drama this is the time we would begin listening for the sound of ropes and pulleys being worked, when we would begin looking for a god to be lowered onto the stage who would set everything right again. Our righteousness is as filthy rags.

There is much about the doctrine of the Second Coming that has that *deus ex machina* feel about it. Especially when you consider that, in those ancient Greek dramas, the lowering of the gods on ropes and pulleys was often accompanied by other special effects, like thunder and lightning. Listen again to the way Mark describes it: “In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” Then, in other words, he will clean up the mess we have made, and set everything right.

Does it mean that God is a poor playwright? That he has to salvage his

script with such a trite literary device? Or does it simply mean that he has made us co-authors in this play he is writing, given us the freedom to write our own lines, invent our own action? And after having our own way all these years we look up to find that the plot of the drama has gotten terribly twisted, that there seems no way out of the mess we have made of the thing. And that's when we hand the script back to the Playwright. "Here," we say. "You fix it. We've done all we can do." And that's when God shakes his head and mutters, "Well, there's no easy way to straighten this out. It will take a miracle." But if the doctrine of the Second Coming tells us nothing else it tells us this: for the believer, divine intervention is always an option. It's not only something we hope for; it's something we count on, knowing that when things are at their worst God is at his best, and that the one who began this play in the first place will know when, and how, to write its ending.

—Jim Somerville © 2023