

## *Love Came Down*

### **Isaiah 64:1-9**

Wayne Eberly  
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What if God came to earth? That is a really interesting question. That is what the prophet is asking for in Isaiah 64. The prophet cries out to God, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! 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! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down and the mountains trembled before you.” (Isaiah 64:1-3) What if God came to earth? The prophet envisions some trembling mountains and blazing fire and boiling water and the enemies of God, the nations, quaking with fear as God comes to bring judgment.

You go through a time like the exile, the complete disruption of your life, the destruction of your treasured city and the sacred temple in Jerusalem, the despair of being defeated by your enemies and the humiliation of being carried off into exile and you can imagine how much the prophet wanted God to rend the heavens. The prophet wanted God to come down, right here and right now and fix this mess of a world he was living in. And the prophet wanted God to fix the world by bringing judgment on the nations, on the enemies of God’s chosen people Israel.

Yet there is an honesty in the prophet that we do well to notice. It is not just the nations that deserve judgment. He looks at himself and he looks at the people of God and he realizes they also have fallen woefully short of being the people God called them to be. Remember there is an earlier encounter between the prophet and God in Isaiah 6 when the glory of the Lord is revealed and as the doorposts and thresholds shake and the temple is filled with smoke the prophet cries out, “Woe is me! 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) You find that same attitude even as the prayer ascends for

God to rend the heavens and come down. Acknowledging that God comes to the help of those who gladly do right and remember the ways of God, the prophet also laments, “But when we continued to sin against your ways, you were angry. How can we be saved? 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.” (64:5, 6)

People of God, let us also be reminded that the honest recognition of our own sinfulness is met by the mercy of God. In Isaiah 6 the Lord touches the lips, the unclean lips of the prophet (and we imagine) the unclean lips of the people with a burning coal and says, “See, this coal has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” Perhaps it is this realization that God has a wonderful habit of taking our sins which are scarlet, flaming red, and making them white as snow that leads the prophet to call on God’s merciful nature. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people.” (64:8, 9)

The prophet cries out, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down.” Admitting the sinfulness of God’s enemies and the sinfulness of God’s own people and his own sinfulness, there is a movement to ask that when God comes he would not be angry and that he would not remember our sins forever. So again I ask the question, “What if God came to earth?” What if God were to rend the heavens and come down among us. What if God came down to earth and it turned out God loved the earth. That is an interesting thought for this Sunday before Thanksgiving. What if God came to earth and he loved it.

What do you love about this earth? Is it the changing colors and the crisp cool air of the fall? Do you love looking out and seeing a fresh dusting of snow? Is it the flowers coming to life after the long winter? Is it the warm sun on your face on a summer day? Why would it surprise us that Jesus might have loved those very things when he came to earth? I imagine him taking his sandals off and walking barefoot on the shores of a lake or ocean, wiggling his toes in the warm sand. Or sleeping out

under the night sky and gazing affectionately at all of those stars and planets and galaxies and solar systems that he knew by name...and as he closed his eyes to sleep in peace it might have been like an episode of the Walton's as he called out, "Good night Jupiter. Good night Saturn. Good night Pleiades and Orion, ah, and yes, I see you having fun out there you old Bear and your cubs. Good night sun. Good night moon." And even though we might end our days by praying to our Father in Heaven, when he says good night to his Father in Heaven, well, those two have a pretty tight bond.

What do you love about this earth? Do you like to swim in the salty sea? How about getting out on a boat on the open waters and feeling the wind in your face and the sun on your back? Are you one who climbs a mountain and exults in conquering a summit? Do you like to sneak away to a quiet place and spend your day in rest and reflection?

Why would it surprise us when Jesus looked at that Jordan River, with everyone else jumping in and getting baptized, thrashing around in the water, why would it surprise us that he decided to jump right in with the rest of us? If he loved this earth, don't you think he would not only jump in, he might have even shouted out, "Cannonball!" If you like being out on the sea, can you even imagine the fun he had as the winds and the waves and the thunder and lightning tossed the boat around like anxious little children crying out to the one who made them and saying, "Jesus, you are asleep in the boat. Wake up and come play with us." His legs felt the strain and his lungs the burn as he climbed the hills of Galilee to preach a sermon or to meet his old buddies Moses and Elijah. And maybe his friends the birds told each other to hush when Jesus would sneak off to a quiet place to rest, to pray, to be alone with his Heavenly Father.

What do you love about this earth? Do you love the smell of fresh baked bread? How about holding a warm loaf in your hand and cutting off a piece when it is just out of the oven? Do you feel your pulse quicken when a friend invites you over to a lobster boil or for some fish and chips? What about a BBQ, some moist and tender meat sizzling over a fire? Do you enjoy a nice glass of Chianti or Chardonnay? Maybe even just a cold cup of water on a hot day.

Why would it surprise us when Jesus looked at a crowd of people who had gone all day without a bite to eat that instead of wringing his hands like his disciples and figuring out plans to send the weary crowd home, he came up with this awesome idea: Let's feed everyone! I wish I could have seen the look on his face as he pulled one more fish out of the basket and another loaf from the oven and then one more fish out of the basket and another loaf from the oven, and then...when everyone had enough, when there were even leftovers...and then whispering to his closest disciples, "I am the bread of life." When the prophet cried out for God to rend the heavens and come down, I find it hard to believe he thought that God coming down would include attending a wedding, one of those precious days when the emphasis is not on fasting, but on feasting. But sure enough, Jesus went to a wedding. His mom had to coax him into action, but when the six stone water jars, each holding twenty to thirty gallons of water, had been richly blessed it is safe to say there was an abundance of wine. When God came down to earth he loved this earth, the fish and the fruit and the grain and the new wine.

Those who wanted God to rend the heavens and come down and judge this earth and knock a few heads together and pour out his wrath on their enemies, they took offense when Jesus came and celebrated life. Those who wanted God to come and give this earth a good thrashing got upset with how Jesus was living his life. They said of him, "He is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners.'" (Luke 11:19) They wanted him to be like the self-righteous man who went to the temple to pray alongside a tax-collector. That self-righteous man prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." But Jesus wasn't like that. In fact, when that tax collector offered his prayer, saying, "God, have mercy on me, I am a sinner," Jesus said that is true prayer. And he went to the home of tax-collectors, to the home of Zacchaeus and to the home of Levi, both of whom were notorious tax-collectors, and happened to be friends with a whole slew of other sinners. You guessed it. Jesus caught flack for that. But those who wanted God to rend the heavens and come down and knock a few heads together only heard this from Jesus: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

When Jesus came down to earth he loved it. He loved it in all of its beauty and he loved it in all of its brokenness. Is it too much for us to believe that when God chose to rend the heavens, when God chose to come down to earth, that when he came to earth he loved it? He loved us? Of course he knew what he was getting into. Of course he knew about our sin and our sadness and our sorrow. He didn't ignore it. He didn't wink at sin. He didn't give it an ok and say it didn't really matter anyway. No, he had a plan to address that sin and that brokenness and that sadness and sorrow and the deep separation that exists because of sin. He came and he came to reconcile this world. He came to show us this incredible plan God had so that instead of counting our sins against us he would forgive those sins and bring us back into a right relationship with the one who created us and loved us from the beginning.

It turns out those who called Jesus a glutton were right. But they were also ever so wrong. He was a glutton, but it was for punishment, for our punishment, for the sin which was weighed against us. He took that sin, took that punishment, he took that pain and by his wounds he brought healing and wholeness. Today as we rejoice in the wonderful blessing that when God came down to earth he loved this earth, let us remember that he proved his love by giving his life for us on the cross. That is always the central part of the story of Jesus. And yet on a day of Thanksgiving, it must be ok to simply taking time to say thank you to the God who did indeed rend the heavens and come down, and when he came to this earth he loved it. And he loved us.

I read a story about a farmer named Burley Coulter who went out one night. The year was 1948, not long after the end of World War II. The story is titled, "The Dark Country". **(All references are to "The Dark Country", by Wendell Berry, found in *A Place in Time*).** Burley was a farmer and he had brought his harvest in. It was too soon to begin preparing for the next planting, his work was all done, he loved to go out and hunt for some pelts, his hunting dogs were barking up a storm, so one night when the harvest was safely in he packed up his gun, a few cold biscuits, let his dogs loose, and he went out in the fields and forests to do a little hunting. And yet he did more than hunting for some pelts.

As he walks he remembers. As he walks he reflects. As he walks he reminisces. Burley thinks about those two fine dogs hunting with him, how they are part of his life, when he got them, who he got them from, their characteristics and habits, and how they have been mighty fine companions for him. Have you ever had a dog that just became a part of your life, a cat, another pet, one of God's creatures who helped you feel a little closer to life, a little closer to love?

As Burley walks he passes places that have names. This is familiar country to him, familiar places. He has lived here all his life. He crosses Willow Run and follows the woods along Katy's Branch round about the Stepstone Hollow. Places that are named, that are known, that have marked days and seasons in his life. Do you have some places that are named? Going back to the camp where my dad took us every summer is to encounter named places that are sacred now, Happy Gap, the Lagoon River, Ella Falls, Sequoia Lake, and a little pool fed by the smallest of waterfalls that my mom named as Bubble Pool. To sit beside Bubble Pool is to be five years old with my mom lifting a branch to get a better look at a flower or holding a ladybug and calling us all to come and see what God has done.

Some of the named places belong to people. Burley passes the Proudfoot place, "Where big old Tol Proudfoot, hero of many a good story, and his little wife, Miss Minnie, had passed their years together." Tol had been dead five years and Miss Minnie died last summer, and their farm had begun to show signs of being run down. "Miss Minnie had been Burley's teacher in all eight grades of his schooling. In that old long time he and Miss Minnie had been, we might say, philosophically opposed. Miss Minnie believed that learning was desirable; she thought that students should love to learn. Burley, on the contrary, believed in not learning a speck of anything until he absolutely had to." She taught him until he learned, but he never found joy in learning, and that was the way it went for "eight long years, in which it seemed to him he experienced eight good days: the last day of school in every one of those years."

Now as Burley thinks of Miss Minnie these many years later, “By her persistence and her undiscourageable belief in the possibility of ‘human improvement’ and the ‘goodness in every human heart,’ she taught him a great deal that he was unwilling to learn. He still remembers all she taught him, and now, as she often prophesied, he is grateful. After their long struggle was over, she had the grace, to his surprise, to remain interested in him and to be nice to him, and he finally found the grace in himself, also to his surprise, to respect her and to look for ways to be kind to her.” Have you had people like Miss Minnie in your life, people it took a while to understand just what a blessing they were in your life, people who pushed you and believed in you and one day you look up and not only are they your friends but you have become protective of them? And Burley kept walking.

From friends he moves to family, to his own son, and to his nephews Tom and Nathan. Remember this story is set in 1948, and the days of war are not far removed. Burley has worried about his own son Danny, but, “The boys Burley had really worried about had been Tom and Nathan when they were in the war. He had worried about Tom until Tom was killed, which is a bad way to stop worrying about somebody. He had worried about Nathan until the war ended and Nathan got home, and then he kept worrying about him. Nathan came home and went to work, went right back into it...as if there had been no interruption. But when he wasn’t at work, it appeared like he couldn’t come to rest, couldn’t find a place to stop. And he was god-awful quiet about whatever had happened to him. He was like his daddy and had never had a big amount to say, but you couldn’t get a peep out of him about the war.

‘I reckon it got pretty bad over yonder.’ ‘Yep’. That is all he will say.”

As Burley thinks of his son and his nephews, one dead and one trying to find himself in a difficult time, he simply says out loud and to himself, ‘Well, bless him.’ And then he said, ‘Bless ‘em all.’ And a tremor of love for the three boys, the dead and the living, had passed through him and shaken him.” Do you have people you worry about because they are people you love? Do you have people where after you have worried you feel a tremor of love and simply say, “Bless ‘em all.”

Burley has more than serious thoughts and more than tender thoughts as he takes that long walk. He is thinking about his dogs out there trying to tree a raccoon and he starts to think about getting himself some pelts. The combination of his dogs and the thought of pelts reminds him of “the fellow who had an extra smart little hunting dog. Whenever this fellow wanted a pelt, he would show a stretching board of whatever size to the little dog. The little dog would look at the board, tear out for the woods, and pretty soon come back with a possum or raccoon whose hide would just fit that board. Everything went fine with this fellow, he was the envy of everybody, until the day he made the mistake of letting the little dog into the kitchen where he caught sight of the wife’s ironing board. The little dog took a careful look, tore out for the woods, and nobody ever saw hide nor hair of him again. Burley used to tell that story to his nephews, and then to his own son, until they got too old to believe it. But Burley still thinks it’s a pretty good story, and now and again he tells it to himself.” Every time he tells it he laughs, even if it just to himself. Have you ever had some stories that you loved so much you told them over and over again, until your family got past being tired of them and they became part of the silliness and the happiness of a life well lived.

Now it is late at night. Really, it is early in the morning. Burley finds a barn, set way off all by itself. There is a well and he pumps some fresh water and takes a drink. He is tired and thirsty and the clean, cold, pure water washes down his throat and he feels refreshed. Have you ever had a drink of clear cold water, and can you remember how it refreshes your body and your soul. He pulls out the cold biscuits he packed the night before. Just a simple biscuit, but it is the recipe his momma taught him, and she learned it from her momma, and her momma before that. When is a biscuit not a biscuit? Just one bite into one of those cold biscuits and Burley is seated at the table with loved ones from near and far. This whole story has been about a world that God loves, a world where there are faithful dogs and faithful teachers and struggles with loved ones and laughter and a deep and rich appreciation for life. Now the story comes to an end, as Burley comes to that barn.

“When he has eaten all the biscuits and again pumped himself a drink, he goes into the barn, taking great care with the lantern. It is a feed barn, an old one well kept up, with a hayloft, a small corn crib, four horse stalls, and a large pen for feeding cattle. The cattle have been sold, or moved nearer home, where maybe, so far into the winter, there is more hay. Everywhere are the signs and traces of a good farmer, who knows what he is doing and likes doing it.” This whole story leads up to a barn where everywhere are the signs and traces of a good farmer who knows what he is doing and likes doing it. I wonder if the life of faith isn’t a long journey for us where we reflect on our lives and the world, the broken and the beautiful, and we finally realize God did indeed rend the heavens, he has come down, and everywhere around us, if we just look, are signs and traces of a good God who knows what he is doing and likes doing it. Anyway, in that old barn, Burley decides to lay down and sleep. He goes over where the feeding pen is for the cows and he climbs in. And the story ends by telling us that feeding trough he has climbed into is a manger. The story ends with a manger. Next Sunday we enter Advent. I hope during the journey of Advent you will believe the good news. There is a God who loves this earth, who has come to this earth. Look closely. Everywhere around us, if we just look, are signs and traces of a good God who knows what he is doing and he likes doing it. And maybe at the end of our journey in Advent we will see a manger, holding the greatest treasure God could have given, and we will climb into that manger. May we sleep in heavenly peace.