

THE BEST IS YET TO COME

Sermon, November 27, 2011

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

Professional golfer Tommy Bolt, winner of the 1958 US Open and inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2002, was mainly remembered for two things: His graceful swing and his terrible temper. His fiery disposition earned him the nickname "Thunder" and "Terrible Tommy". He was known to throw and even break his golf clubs during rounds; in fact, I'm told his penchant for throwing clubs led to the adoption of a PGA rule specifically prohibiting such behavior. The story is told that in one tournament, after missing six straight putts, four of them teetering on the very edge of the cup, Tommy Bolt shook his fist at the heavens and shouted, "Why don't you come down and fight like a man!"

I'm sure just about every golfer has probably felt that emotion as if all the powers of the universe have conspired to foul up his or her game. That is certainly true of non-golfers as well. I suspect more than a few of us here at some difficult time or another have felt like shaking a fist heavenward and asking, "Why don't You come down and explain Yourself, why don't You come down here and meet me face to face?"

The prophet Isaiah must have certainly felt like that. It was not anger, however, that caused him to cry out in our Old Testament lesson, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!" Isaiah's plea was one of desperation. The prophet spoke on behalf of a people who were returning from exile to find a devastated city, a ruined temple, and coming back home was not the glorious vision they were expecting it to be. And so the prophet is crying for God to come down, to tear open the heavens, to come with fire and might and make Himself known. "Do something, God!" he says, "Shake things up! Make Yourself known!" The prophet goes on to rightly acknowledge that no other God in history actually responds and works for those who wait for Him, God is a god "... who acts on behalf of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways." But the problem is the people had stopped waiting on God, they no longer gladly did what was right, they had not remembered God and His ways. Isaiah uses vivid imagery to describe the state the people are in: "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags (*their good deeds are so mixed with impure motives that they are stained like filthy rags*) We all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you." The people of Israel had ignored God, and are now realizing what this had cost them.

Then in verse 8, we have this wonderful three-letter word: "**Yet.**" "Yet," says the prophet. "Yet" is a small but powerfully hope-laden word we find in so many of the Old Testament laments. "Yet, O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord, do not remember our sins forever. Look upon us, we pray, for we are your people." Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman calls this, "The Mighty 'yet', the 'yet' that is at the core of Isaiah's theology." Actually, this word "Yet" is at the core of *all* biblical theology, the "yet" that makes hope possible when logic and circumstance seem to dictate otherwise. This is the "yet" that proclaims that because of God's grace there is always hope, hope that pierces the harshest of the realities about us. That's what this prophet's yearning for God to come down is all about. It's about praying and believing that God can and will ultimately do something about the mess we're in. It's about expressing belief and confidence that this is God's world and we are God's people no matter what! In spite of our leaving God behind and turning to our own ways, the prophet declares "**YET** we are still God's people and God is still our God." This is the "Yet" proclaiming the best is YET to come. In this lament the prophet expresses Israel's repentance, the people are turning back to God, and he now gives voice to the Hope that God will come to His people. The Hope of Advent. We celebrate that hope today; the hope that was partially fulfilled as God came to His people again and again in divine intervention, the hope that was mightily (but still partially) fulfilled when God came to His people in the flesh in the first arrival of Emmanuel, God in the flesh, and the hope that will be completely fulfilled when He rends the heavens and comes down in all His divine glory and majesty once and for all time.

Yes, there will be a time when God will "rend the heavens and come down" in all His glory. Jesus talks about this in our Gospel passage when He says, "No one knows that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father." That Day or Hour Jesus speaks of is that glorious time when the kingdom of God will come in all its fullness, and the Son of Man will come as Judge to usher in a new heaven and a new earth. Exactly when that will happen is something neither the angels nor even Jesus knows, but it'll happen! And He tells His followers to be alert in the meantime. The watchfulness Jesus tells His followers to keep is not a matter of watching the hours of some cosmic clock tick down to the zero hour. We are not to be like some hourly employee who is just sitting on his hands watching the clock at work instead of actually working, or just keeping an eye out for the Boss to "look busy" when he comes back. I've had jobs like that ... mundane jobs full of tedium and seemingly thankless tasks which seem to defy the laws of physics by making clocks go slower. I've also had jobs where I was so engrossed in what I was doing the time would just fly by. *That's* the kind of watchfulness Jesus implores His

disciples to have ... an alertness that is attentive to our calling, busily engaged in work and service and ministry. It's the kind of watchfulness that is working as if the Boss would walk in at any moment, but not out of fear ... no, you are working as if you *hope* the Boss will come by any moment, because you love being a team player in his employ and you are proud of your work, proud of your calling, and the thought of the Boss coming by fills you with eager anticipation!

In Jennifer Hayes' 1997 book Pearls of Wisdom from Grandma, former supermodel Christie Brinkley tells a story of fond memories of her grandmother Mamie Cecil Bowling. Grandma Bowling often took care of Christie and her brother, Greg, when they were little. On occasion when the children would become too much for her, Christie's grandmother had a unique way of taking a break. She would put little Christie and Greg on the kitchen floor, then she would put her false teeth down in front of them. Grandmother would warn them not to move, or her teeth would bite them! She would then go off to another room, perhaps to lie down for a bit. Christie reports that she and her brother always stayed perfectly still until their grandmother came back and retrieved her teeth.

Now, Jesus has not left his teeth of His mouth until He comes back; He has left the Words of His mouth! And His Words are not about us sitting still, being terrified of some divine "bite" should we misbehave in the meantime, sitting still waiting in dread fear until He comes back to take his teeth away. No, His words are all about active engagement in this world until He returns. Jesus says to us, "I will be back! In the meantime, stay awake, keep at it, stay ready, continue in My Word. There is a new world coming!" Yes, there will be a grand, dramatic, once and for all return of the Son of Man, a time when Jesus will return. And we are to look forward to that grand fulfillment of God's redemption, to the wondrous and glorious events of the culmination of God's salvation. Jesus' final return is not so much a threat of judgment as it is an exciting and glorious *consolation* ... it is the joyful and certain *hope* that God will indeed bring to completion the salvation and redemption of this world He so loved that He sent his only Son. God will ensure all will end well.

I came across a great story about the famed movie director, Cecil B. DeMille. When production began on the movie *Ben Hur*, DeMille talked to Charlton Heston, the star of the movie, about the all-important chariot race at the end. DeMille encouraged Heston to learn to drive the chariot himself, rather than just using a stunt double. Heston agreed to take chariot-driving lessons to make the movie as authentic as possible. Learning to drive a chariot with horses four abreast, however, was no small matter. After extensive work and days of practice, Heston reported to DeMille. "I think I can drive the chariot all right, Cecil," said Heston, "but I'm not at all sure I can actually win the race." Smiling, DeMille replied, "Heston, you just stay in the race ... and I'll make sure you win." **

Those are the words of God to every one of us ... this is the hope of Advent! The Director, God Almighty, says to all of us, *"You just stay in the race, and I'll make sure you win."* Keep at it, fight the good fight, run the race, keep being faithful, do the best you know how, and we can bank on this: *The Director will finish what He started*; that is true for you and for all creation. That means there will be a world made new, re-newed, redeemed, a world without the pain of suffering and separation and death, a world without disease, without violence, without pain, without war, without nation against nation or religion against religion, with plowshares and pruning hooks replacing weapons of mass destruction, a world without poverty or refugees, without children soldiers or suicide bombers or abandoned babies, a world that will have no need of doctors or psychiatrists or police or soldiers or even ministers! Who needs ministers when all about God will be clear, made known, seen and experienced? All will one day be made clear, whole, right, good, complete ... and that is good news! The best is YET to come! John Calvin summarized it best for me when he wrote that before Eden we were innocent, yet able to sin. After Eden, we were sinful, unable NOT to sin. But after Christ's coming, we will be fully redeemed, unable ever to sin again!

This is the vision of what is to come. Are we living in the last days? I certainly hope so, but I don't know. Not even the angels know. According to our Gospel, not even Jesus knows. Only God knows. In the meantime, we work to serve him the best we know how. This season of Advent is not primarily a time to prepare for Christmas; it is a time to prepare for the coming of Christ. It is about our yearning for the fulfillment of the promises of God, when all things will be made new. As Dr. James McCord, the late President of Princeton Seminary, put it: "The fix is on: the Judge is also our redeemer." The Judge Who is coming is on our side!

Even so, come Lord Jesus! Rend the heavens and come on down!

***:* I got this story from a secondary source who footnoted Mary Hollingsworth's *Fireside Stories of Love, Life and Laughter* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), page 4. However, as pointed out to me by a Heston fan in the congregation, the director of *Ben Hur* was William Wyler, not DeMille. I did a little more research and learned Wyler had worked under DeMille in previous films, and more than likely had a close working/consulting relationship with him. So, it's plausible DeMille conversed on the set with Heston without being the director, and that DeMille had much influence on and with Wyler. DeMille also had a reputation for despising actors who were unwilling to take physical risks. Such was the case when Victor Mature refused to wrestle the lion in *Samson and Delilah*, though the lion was tame and toothless. DeMille remarked Mature was "100% yellow." Anyway, I have Hollingsworth's book on order, and will see what she has to say for herself on this story. Keep posted. slc).