

November 29, 2020 – Isaiah 64:1-9 & Mark 11:1-10

The year was 1992. I was 10 years old. And I was attending for the fourth year in a row the Creation Christian music festival at Agape Farms in Mount Union, PA. Creation was then and still is, I believe, the largest contemporary Christian music festival in the world. Over 50,000 people would gather for the evening headliners. Over 100,000 for the entire event. And my family was among them that year.

This particular evening, we were anxiously waiting to hear the band DC Talk. Who were just entering their peak years at that point. And had drawn a massive crowd.

But we were worried. Because we had been warned earlier in the evening that their bus had broken down several hours away from the campgrounds. And that they were doing everything in their power to make it here in time for their set. But they just couldn't promise anything.

So we sat there. Waiting and waiting. The stage was dark. Stagehands were testing sound equipment. The band was no where to be seen. But we noticed that off to the side, next to the stage, they were clearing an area of people. Blocking it off from all foot traffic.

And the next thing we knew, they announced that the band was only 5 minutes away. And everyone cheered and waited. Expecting them to come running out on stage at any moment.

But they didn't run out on stage. Not yet. First, they had to land. In a helicopter. Next to the stage.

Everybody went nuts. I mean, talk about making an entrance. But the next year, they decided to one-up themselves. Instead of arriving in a helicopter, the three band members arrived on motorcycles, that they drove in circles around the crowds before riding up directly onto the stage.

DC Talk knew how to make an entrance. They had a great Christian message. But they were also superb performers. And any performer knows that those first few minutes in front of a crowd can set the tone for your entire performance.

And what's kind of funny, is that God himself seems to understand that fact. He understands human nature. He understands our need to be awed and impressed and even a little frightened before we give him our attention.

And the Old Testament is filled with examples of God making an entrance. When God shows up in Sodom and Gomorrah, fire rains from the the heavens. When God shows up at the Tower of Babel, people lose the ability to understand each others. When God shows up in ancient Egypt, water turns to blood, hail falls from the sky, locusts and frogs infest the fields, people die, the Red Sea parts, and then drowns pharaoh's army.

But as impressive as all that was, the one that sticks with Israel the most is God showing up at Mount Sinai. Because all those others were God showing up in wrath and punishment. Of course he's going to be frightening then.

But at Mount Sinai, God is showing up in love. And he's still terrifying. Earthquakes and smoke and fire and lightning. The entire mountain seems to explode right in front of them.

And then God says, "Hey come on up. I wanna talk to you." It's no wonder that the people respond by saying, "Um... Moses? You go. He likes you."

But it works. From that moment on, whenever an Israelite talks about God coming to earth, he talks about Mount Sinai. God made an entrance. And it set the tone for their entire relationship with him.

Such that when Isaiah prays that God would come and rescue his people from their sinfulness, that he would come and restore them to the way they were in the past. Right after he gave them his commandments. Right when they were the most aware of God's covenant of love with them. It's Mount Sinai that he thinks about.

*“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence — as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil.”*

That's a description of Mount Sinai, right there. Lightning rending the heavens. The mountain quaking with fire and smoke. Even Isaiah, who understands the coming of the Messiah far better than just about anyone until Christ actually appears, even he can't imagine the coming of the Lord being anything but a day of earthquakes and fire, like it was in the time of Moses.

And yet, that's not at all what it's like when Jesus does arrive. Because he doesn't make an entrance like he did in the Old Testament. There is no confusion of languages. No fire from heaven. No Plagues. No earthquakes.

There's just a baby. In a barn. With a mother and a father. And shepherds and a manger. I don't know if the birth of Christ was a silent night or not. But it certainly was an ordinary night.

And yet, that's how Jesus's entire ministry goes from that point forward. Quiet. Ordinary. He's raised by two ordinary parents. Goes through an ordinary childhood. So unremarkable, the gospel writers don't even record most of it.

His first miracle he refuses to even acknowledge. He tells his mother not to tell anyone that he just turned water into wine. He does the same thing to those he heals. Tell no one, he orders the paralytic.

Still, word gets around. But he's certainly not out for the attention. Between running off into the wilderness to be by himself. Or walking on water to escape the crowds. Jesus seems bound and determined to not be a performer. To not make an entrance.

Until, of course, Palm Sunday, our Gospel reading. When the people of Jerusalem almost force the Triumphal Entry upon him. I mean, Jesus certainly wasn't looking for it. He wants to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. This is not exactly a parade he's putting together here.

But the people are determined. If this is the promised Messiah. If this is God come to earth, then he needs to have an entrance as grand as Mount Sinai. He needs to have an entrance fit for a king, leading them into war, to retake their fallen kingdom.

*“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!”*

Jesus goes along with it. Then he ruins the whole thing by making a scene at the temple. And by calling everyone around him sinners and hypocrites. And by insisting that rather than save Jerusalem from its enemies, he's going to let it be destroyed. Some entrance, Jesus. Don't you know how this works?

Yeah, he does. He knows exactly what he's doing. Because Jesus does want to make an entrance. He does want to set a tone for his ministry. But he doesn't want to do it at his birth. Or at his first miracle. Or on Palm Sunday. Jesus isn't interested in a Mount Sinai entrance.

He's interested in a Mount Calvary entrance. An entrance that sees him nailed to a cross. And lifted up for all the world to see. Jesus, king of the Jews, sitting on his throne. Shedding his blood. In a spectacle that gathers crowds of people from all over. Just to mock his performance as Messiah.

Jesus wanted all along to make an entrance. To set a tone for his ministry. But it wasn't ever supposed to be an entrance of grandeur or of awe or of fear. It was an entrance of humility and sacrifice and compassion.

An entrance that made God's people look past Mount Sinai and see Mount Calvary. Look past God's wrath and punishment and see his love poured out on the cross.

This is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent in the church year is the time we celebrate our Lord's coming. We've got written on our new paraments up on the altar: Behold, He comes. Behold, he came. Behold, he still comes. Behold, he will come again.

This is our focus. God made flesh, coming to us sinners, for our redemption. While for the rest of the world it's the time we celebrate the coming of the nation's biggest, most expensive, most extravagant holiday. Those two versions of Advent are rarely compatible with each other, for many, many reasons.

But maybe the most overlooked aspect is the simple fact that our Lord's birth wasn't supposed to be all that impressive. There was no glitz and glamour in it. No parties or gift exchanges. It was a phenomenally ordinary birth.

Why? Because our focus shouldn't be on the birth itself. It should be on the purpose for that birth. On the very ordinary road that Jesus walked for over 30 years. All to arrive at that moment when he did something truly extraordinary. Truly earth shaking. Something that truly rent the heavens and revealed to us that God had come down.

The moment when he gave his life for you and me. Amen.