

It's Advent, the season of preparation for Christmas. It's the season of longing and waiting as we prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. And this Advent, we are hearing from the prophet Isaiah. No other book of the Bible tops Isaiah when it comes to themes of longing and waiting and expectation. For the next three weeks we'll be listening to what the book of Isaiah has to say to us as we prepare for Christmas. This morning our OT lesson is from Isaiah ch64.

This portion of Isaiah is almost universal in its sense of longing. Yes, it was written in a specific time. It was probably written by the third prophet to use the name Isaiah. Third Isaiah's time was a time of struggle and suffering and rebuilding. It was a time when people knew that things were not as good as they once were. But their specific feelings of longing resonate with any time of struggle and hardship.

The prophet appeals to God in poignant words. Our lesson opens, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

What a statement. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

Isaiah is saying, 'Things aren't going well—so God, come down now. Come down as fast as you can. Rip your way through the sky if it stands in your way, but come, come now, ASAP.

Then, he says, God, come the way you came to our ancestors.

Isaiah says, "From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways."

God, in the past, you came down and you did awesome things, and the mountains shook in your presence. So God, come and show your power, come make the mountains quake again.

God, we know your track record. God, you had a glorious track record in the past. We want to see you acting that way again. So come. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

But then Isaiah notes that there is a problem. And the problem is us. The classical term for our problem is sin.

And remember, biblical sin is not so much about being evil or wicked. Remember, biblical sin is not about breaking some arbitrary set of rules or laws. No. Sin in scripture is about something much more serious, and something much more basic.

Sin, at heart, is about us trying to do things our way rather than God's way. Sin is about us missing the target, missing out on who we could be, missing out on our relationship to God, missing out on what God creates us to be.

Sin is attempting the pass but it ends up incomplete. Sin is swinging at the pitch but striking out. Sin is about us making our best effort, but falling short.

Sin is ultimately about trusting in ourselves, trusting in our own skills, or powers, or portfolios, or credit scores, or talents, or whatever else we place our trust in, rather than trusting in God. It's a fundamental problem that bites us in the rear end all the time. Who do you ultimately trust? Trust in yourself? Or trust in God?

Isaiah is ruminating on this question of our sin.

Isaiah says, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth." Our righteous deeds, the things we do best, the way we are when we try our hardest, our righteous deeds are like a soiled cloth.

And then he says, "We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away." We try to do the right thing, but we shrivel up like an autumn leaf, and we're blown about by our own sin. Our best turns out to be messy, and we seem so out of control.

And yet, he concludes, "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." God we want you. We mess things up on our own. But remember who you are. You are our father. You are our potter. We are your children. We are your handiwork.

So God, come down. We need you. We can't do it on our own. Our best is not enough. We keep messing things up. We need you. So come and help us. Come and save us. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

That's the message of Isaiah 64.

And that message is repeated in a profound way in an unlikely place—in a holiday movie: Tim Burton's animated modern classic, the 1993 movie, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The movie's main character is a tall, thin skeleton whose name is Jack Skellington, the Pumpkin King of Halloween Town.

Halloween Town is populated by ghosts and ghouls and goblins, by monsters and mad-scientists. Their sole purpose is to make sure that everyone in the world has a really scary Halloween. But Jack has grown tired of scaring people year after year. And he wishes that there were more to life.

Then one day he's swept away to another world. Jack finds himself in very unusual place. The scary Pumpkin King from Halloween Town finds himself sitting in a snow bank outside of Christmas Town. And he's blown away by the spectacle.

He is absolutely overwhelmed by all the new sights and sounds. He keeps singing, "What's this? What's this?" He is absolutely delighted by everything he encounters.

Jack has never seen snow before. He's never seen any Christmas ornaments, or Christmas trees, or twinkling lights, or Christmas decor. He is amazed and thrilled by all that he sees. He sings and dances as he encounters a whole new reality, the reality of Christmas.

Jack is so amazed and delighted that he decides that he and all of his Halloween friends are going to take over Christmas this year. But Jack has a hard time explaining the concept to them. They never encountered the vision that he has seen.

And so their Christmas preparations are warped. They build scary toys. They construct a sleigh out of an old a coffin, and they harness reindeer skeletons to pull it. Jack has Santa Claus kidnapped, and Jack himself flies off to distribute toys on Christmas Eve.

He ends up coming down the chimney with very scary toys—a real shrunken head, a maniacal doll that chases kids around, a snake that eats up all the packages under the tree, then consumes the tree itself. Jack wants to spread holiday cheer. But he warps the holiday, and all he spreads is fear.

Jack makes a complete mess of Christmas. It could have been right out of Isaiah 64. Jack's best attempts at being righteous turn out to be filthy rags. Jack's best version of Christmas is an awful, scary mess. Eventually Jack has to let Santa salvage things. Santa takes care of Jack's mess. And Santa eventually visits Halloween Town and gives its residents a taste of what Christmas could really be like. Santa is able to do what Jack never could.

And folks, that's the world we live in. That's the mess we live in. We often try our best, and yet things never work out quite like we would hope. That's especially true this time of year.

This time of the year we have high expectations. We think, "Maybe this year I can have the perfect Christmas. Maybe if I buy the right gifts, maybe if I put up the most beautiful decorations, maybe if I go visit my relatives, maybe that will fix things. Maybe this is the year when things will be perfect."

And yet, things usually don't work out like we dream. You buy the "perfect" toy for your toddler only to have them play with the box. You buy the "perfect" toy for your child only to have them grow tired of it before New Year's Day. You buy the "perfect" gift for a friend, only to see them in the customer service line exchanging it.

Things don't go perfectly because THINGS will never bring us ultimate satisfaction. The things we buy, the things we do, they're never enough to fix our deeper problems.

Decorations are pretty on the outside, but they don't change what's underneath. Visiting family at Christmas can be nice, but it doesn't change tensions that may be present the rest of the year.

The bottom line is this: warm fuzzy feelings surrounding 1 day at the very best can only put a temporary Band-Aid on problems you have the other 364 days a year. Our holiday reality can't support the weight of the expectations of our holiday hopes.

Our problem is the problem in *A Nightmare Before Christmas*. We don't quite get it. We try too hard, and we mess things up.

Our problem is the problem of Isaiah 64. Our attempts at doing the right thing fall short. Our best is never enough to satisfy us.

We can never meet our own deepest needs. We can never fill all the voids in our lives. We are never the ultimate solution to our ultimate problems.

But the solution for Jack Skellington was to appeal to a higher power, to let Santa be Santa. The solution for Isaiah was to remember that God is father, God is potter. We are his children. We are the work of his hands. The solution for us is to remember who we are, flawed and fallible human beings. And the solution for us is to remember who God is and what God does.

God so loved his messy creation that he sent his Son to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. God sent his Son into the world to wash our sins away. God tells us, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."

God tells us, 'Only I can set things right. Only I can make you as clean as freshly fallen snow.' And I do it by sending my Son.

That's the reason for this Advent season. To prepare for the celebration of God's Son coming to a manger in Bethlehem. To ask him to come again into our hearts. And to look forward to the day when he shall come again to set things right, finally and permanently.

Dreams of a perfect Christmas can never fix things. Trying to make it happen on our own can never fix things. Only the coming of God's perfect Son can bring us what we so long for.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

Even so. Come, Lord Jesus. Come.