

Divine Intervention

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: Over the years I've seen a few reality shows that document what they call interventions. Maybe you're familiar with the concept. The stories revolve around a person who is engaged in some sort of self-destructive behavior. It could be an addiction to alcohol or to drugs, or they may have some kind of eating disorder like anorexia or bulimia, or maybe it's compulsive behavior like hoarding; whatever it is, it's ruining the person's life, destroying their relationships, and putting them at risk of losing their freedom, their health, and possibly their lives. Part of the pattern with all such behaviors is the person is self-deceived. They don't see the path of destruction they're on nor how their irresponsible behavior is adversely affecting the other people in their lives. And when someone confronts them about any of it, they lie about it. They deny it. They insist that "I am in control of this thing. It is not in control of me." And that's what they firmly believe. The trouble is that it's simply not true. They are not in control of their actions. They cannot help themselves. They need outside help. And until they get it, their situation will only get worse.

That's what the intervention is all about. They get everyone they can who's involved with that person's life: family, friends, whoever else, together with a counselor trained in dealing with people who suffer from the condition, and basically ambush the person. It's sort of like a surprise party, except the guest of honor is not at all pleasantly surprised. Each person in turn confronts the subject with what they see going on and how it's affecting them and others. The goal is to get the subject to see the seriousness of their problem and their inability to deal with it on their own, and hopefully then get them to agree to go into a treatment facility where their problem can be addressed by professionals. In a lot of cases, the intervention works. You see, the denials and dodges can be effective when dealing with people one on one; but when everyone you know is confronting you with the same issue and not letting you off the hook, it's a lot harder to do.

The reason I bring this up is that today, the first Sunday in Advent, we're starting a new Church year. And Advent is a penitential season of spiritual preparation to receive our Savior and King. With this end in mind, we prayed in today's collect that our Savior would come and save us from the threatening perils of our sin. That is to say, we asked for a divine intervention. We asked Jesus himself to come confront us with our problem and to deal with it because our problem is bigger than any one of us can handle on our own. That's what we prayed. The trouble is that on many levels, we don't believe it. We are self-deceived. Like the people I was talking about just now, none of us recognizes how deep and serious our sin problem really is. We don't think of the perils of our sin as being particularly threatening. We don't see the path of destruction we're on, nor how our sinful thoughts and actions are ruining our lives, destroying our relationships, and putting us at risk of ending up in everlasting hellfire. We do not properly appreciate how much God hates sin nor do we rightly fear his wrath.

No, we lie to ourselves. We think, "I'm basically a good person; at least, I try to be. I'm spiritually attuned. I say my prayers. I am capable of pleasing God by my actions, and I'm usually fairly successful at doing so. I try to be a good friend and neighbor, helping out where I can. Most people like me. I give to worthy causes and to support the church. Yeah. All in all I'd say I'm pretty good. And while I'm not perfect, my sins, such as they are, are relatively minor. They're not that big a deal. They don't put me in any kind of danger. And God can easily forgive them."

This kind of self-deceived thinking is exactly why we need a divine intervention. And that's what the prophet Isaiah is calling for in today's Old Testament lesson. "O that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence." Isaiah is asking the Lord to do like he did at Mount Sinai. Then he caused his glory to descend on the mountain. Even veiled from the view of the Children of Israel by cloud and smoke, it was a sight too awesome for them to behold. They could not look upon the absolute holiness of the Lord and live. And when the Lord spoke to them from the mountain, giving them his holy Law, they trembled with terror. They begged Moses to have the Lord stop speaking because his words were killing them.

This is the kind of confrontation we need to open our eyes to the seriousness of our sinful condition. And we get it today not by sight, but by the Word of the Lord which is just as powerful to kill the sin nature in each of us. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord tells us how it really is: "Behold, you were angry when we sinned. In our sins we have been a long time, and how shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean."

He describes our sin condition like leprosy, as if our flesh is rotting away even while we live. It excludes us from all human society and prohibits us from entering the presence of the Lord. Everything we touch is contaminated. That's how sin is. Every thought, word, and action is tainted. It's an offense to the Lord. Though we imagine that we have some level of freedom to do good, it's a lie. You do not control your sin. Your sin controls you. If you don't think so, okay, prove it: stop. Don't sin anymore. Stop being selfish. Stop coveting. Stop thinking ill of others. Stop judging them. Stop hating. Stop lusting. Stop trusting in your money, your property, and yourself. Stop lying. And while you're stopping all that, do what the Law actually requires: Love God above all things. Love your neighbors as yourself. Love your enemies too. And forgive everyone who's ever sinned against you. "The Lord meets with those who joyfully work righteousness", Isaiah says, and it's true. But that ain't you. To the Lord you are like one unclean.

It's even worse than that. He says, "All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment (sometimes translated 'filthy rags')". It means that in the sight of the Lord even the things you do that you're proud of, that you evaluate as good and pleasing to him are like presenting him with your soiled, used toilet paper. Far from improving your standing before him, you're insulting him with what you call your good works. You're making him even angrier. And your final situation is worse because to these "offerings" that you wrongly think should please him you add the sin of prideful presumption – of judging good in yourself what the Lord judges evil.

Then he drives the final nail into the coffin: "There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you." That is to say, you haven't got a spiritual bone in your body. Left to your own devices, like our first parents who fell into sin and fled from the presence of the Lord, your natural inclination is also to flee from him. The darkness of sin hates the light of the Lord. It doesn't want to be revealed for what it is. It doesn't want to be exposed. It prefers to live the lie of self-deception.

That's the problem with our sin. It's bigger than any of us imagines. And it needs a solution bigger than any of us can manage. But that's why we're here. It takes a divine intervention for us to see it as we should. And hopefully today we're getting closer to that mark. But even more to the point, it takes a divine intervention to make it right. It's a problem only God can fix.

And that's where Isaiah goes: to an appeal for divine mercy. "But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hands." In other words, we've got nothing. We can't fix ourselves. Like clay in the hands of the potter, we are entirely passive. We can only yield to the Lord's work on us. And he is working. By his Word of Law he is putting to death the sin nature in us. He's causing us to die the death of guilt and shame that brings us to our knees in repentance. In that sense, he is returning us to the dust from which we were taken. He's doing it so that he can remake us in the image of the Savior he sent to redeem us by his perfect life, his death for our sin, and his resurrection to life everlasting. The Word of his forgiveness, earned for us by Jesus on the cross, is what raises us to new life so that we can – in him – live as the children of God: righteous in his sight never by our own thoughts, words, and actions, but only by his.

We pray that he continues this work upon us and so sustain us in saving faith to the end, that we may be guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. On that day, he will rend the heavens and come down one last time. And by his Word, he will raise us once again from the dust of the earth – or change us in an instant if we are alive – and he will form us into the eternally righteous children of God. He will finally and forever save us from the threatening perils of our sin. And we will dwell in the presence of God in perfect joy and without fear.

Therefore we cry, "Hosanna! Save us now, Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!