

"WHEN ARE YOU COMING?"

A Sermon By

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106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 2, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

The year was 1981 and the eyes of the world for several days were focused on Frascati, Italy. A six year old boy had fallen into a deep well. A shaft was dug to free him, but he fell deeper. A midget was lowered two hundred feet into the shaft. He also failed to free the boy. A reporter told of the desperate cry of the boy to his mother, relayed through a microphone into the well. "Mamma, mamma" he kept repeating. "When are you coming?"

The plaintive cry of Isaiah is much like that. He cries out to God,

"Oh, that You would rend the heavens, that You
would come down..." (Isaiah 64: 1)

It's as if he were saying, "Momma, momma...when are you coming?" Isaiah here is yearning for some sign of nearness from a God who seems to have turned His back on His people. A God-forsaken people is a people in trouble. I wonder...

Have there been those times in your life when you have felt "God-forsaken?" If you have then "welcome" to a large and distinguished company of believers. Chances are that every believer will feel that way at some time or another. It may be a condition for our spiritual growth, but God never forsakes us...but at times it may seem that way. And why? Three answers to offer...to share.

HARDSHIPS ENDURED

First of all, Isaiah felt forsaken because of the hardships his people were enduring. Times were bad and the people were oppressed. Things seemed to be going from bad to worse. Perhaps you can identify with some of this.

I heard recently about an uncomfortable experience that happened to Carol Burnett, the actress. She got out of a cab one day here in the city and just happened to catch her coat in the door. The driver was unaware of her plight and slowly began to edge out into the traffic. To keep from being yanked and pulled off her feet, Carol Burnett had to run alongside of the cab down the block.

A passerby noticed her predicament and quickly yelled to the driver. When he finally caught on to what was happening he stopped, jumped out and released her coat. Rather anxiously he asked,

"Are you all right?" "Yes" she gasped...."But how much more do I owe you?"

Well, there are times when life goes that way for all of us. We not only snag ourselves, but we get caught, trapped and sometimes we get a bill for the experience as well. For some of us, of course, our problems are no laughing matter.

Dr. Eugene Brice tells of standing a while back in the backyard of Amelia Earhart's old home up in Atchison, Kansas. As he looked far down the bluff at the Missouri River, he thought of this Kansas girl who would learn to fly. First woman to fly the Atlantic, first woman to fly from Hawaii to California. First woman to attempt an around-the-world solo flight. Last heard from in 1937, far out over the Pacific, her last words were simply: "Position doubtful" and then she was gone. There are many people even in the joy of this Advent Season we now begin who can identify with her last words, "Position doubtful."

We all have those moments in life when we ask "Where is God?" And the poinsettias that soon will adorn our churches and homes and stores all over the land during this month....perhaps they give us a bit of a clue. Are you aware of the requirements necessary to make a poinsettia bloom? It is a very precise balance between temperature and light, so I'm told. It must be a cold and dark place to force them to bloom. It's easy for me to imagine nurseries all over the country with important sealed rooms and "Do Not Enter" signs posted on locked doors for most of the day. And inside, thousands of green plants sit in the darkness. During those required hours of darkness no one would be allowed to enter. Even a flashlight or a lighted "Exit" sign over the door would spoil the beauty that is being created, prepared.

Now there's a marvelous parallel at this very point. There are those dark times in our lives. Those times when we struggle with illness and grief, with loneliness and despair. There are those times when God seems so far removed from us. Yet, it is those very times when "Immanuel" - God with us - is the most significant truth in our lives. I should like to believe that in those times God is giving us the most precise care. He is the Master Gardener, who knows exactly how much hardship and darkness is necessary to produce some of the most beautiful "blooms" in our lives.

Isaiah felt forsaken, first-off, because of the severe hardship that his people were enduring. His people "sat in darkness" awaiting a great light.

OPPRESSIVE POWER OF SIN

Moving on, Isaiah also felt forsaken because of the oppressive power of sin in the lives of his people.

We laugh about sin. We write a book about it, "Whatever Happened to Sin?" Oh, the forbidden always allures us. But think for a moment about living in a truly decadent society. A society in which husbands and wives could not count on each other's love and faithfulness, where little children could not count on secure homes to nurture them, where people live only for pleasure and never accept responsibility for one another. All jokes aside, my guess is that none of us would want to live in such a land.

There's nothing that will starve joy out of people like a steady diet of moral decay. That is why each of us should think seriously about the kind of society we are contributing to. Isaiah could see the effects of sin on his people. He saw the unhappiness and the many tragedies such waywardness brings.

Even worse, there seemed to be no way to turn back the tide. Isaiah watched with helplessness the deterioration all around him. Out of his frustration he accuses God of turning His back. And in verse 17 of chapter 63 he even accuses God of leading the people into sin and hardening their hearts against repentance.

Any of us who have ever tried to shake off unwanted behavior in ourselves or in someone we love know the frustration Isaiah must have been experiencing. It's hard and for some people it seems well-nigh impossible.

In June of Summer 1989, a Florida scuba diver found himself sucked through 1650 feet of intake pipe at the Florida Power and Light's St. Lucie nuclear plant. A security officer saw and rescued him as the pipe deposited him into a canal at the plant.

A plant spokesman said that the intake is marked by a warning buoy and

shielded with a 70 feet by 70 feet cap that sits just above the intake. He said that someone would have to swim underneath the cap and then head for the intake to get sucked in. Hear my point now...

The spokesman's description sounded to me like an explanation of the way that many people get "sucked into" sin, into wrong doing. They get themselves in trouble by avoiding the warning signs and positioning themselves in situations where the danger of sin is imminent. Then, they act surprised when temptation swallows them whole. But it can swallow us whole. It can swallow an entire nation as well as one person. Isaiah saw no hope unless, perhaps, God Himself would intervene and come to the rescue. "Mamma, mamma....when are you coming?"

SILENCE OF GOD Most of all, Isaiah felt forsaken because of the silence of God in the midst of his people's desperate situation. And it's possible that most of us will some day experience that silence if we have not already. Our timing is not God's timing. That silence is terrifying.

It was 1970. Malcolm Emory, a student at Northeastern University in Boston, was convicted of assault and battery on a police officer during an anti-war demonstration. The case revolved solely around Police Officer Vincent Logan's account that he saw Emory throw a rock.

Emory, however, maintained that he had just come out of the library, that his arms were loaded with books, that he threw nothing, that he had merely stopped for a few moments to watch the demonstration.

The court's conviction of Emory cost him his college scholarship, ended his research job with the Navy, and finished his plans for a career in physics. While he did not have to serve jail time, the conviction was a major blow to Emory's life. For years he remained angry over the incident and kept expecting things to be set straight. Finally, after about five years, he realized that he really needed to "get on with his life".

Now 20 years later an unpublished newspaper photograph has been found that shows police dragging Emory off, both his arms loaded down with books. A superior court judge has ruled that Emory is entitled to a new trial and the District Attorney's office has declined to prosecute again. Hence, Emory is now free of the original charge. Further, Emory, a professional welder, has been offered a full scholarship in physics at Northeastern if he would like to resume his studies. Emory says he is simply pleased and relieved to have the matter brought to a close.

There's no guarantee that justice in this life will be either fair or speedy. Some things will be set straight quickly while others may wait 20 years. And still others will await God's "final judgement". Sometimes all we can do is wait. Sometimes all we can do is pray, "Mamma, mamma....when are you coming?"

CHRISTMAS: A REMINDER THAT GOD DOES COME

One final word, Christmas is a reminder to us that God does come. That's the "Good News" for today. Isaiah did not live to see the Messiah come, but He knew that God is faithful to His promises and that one day the Redeemer would be sent.

And thank God for that gentle wind that sweeps over the world at this time, that wind of warmth, love and faith...that caresses the hearts of believers and stirs them and brings them "home" once again.

Stephen Brown tells a beautiful story about a young couple that gets to the heart of this "Good News".

She was 18 and he was 19 when they met. They fell madly in love and one year later they were married. Some six years and three children later, she decided while standing before the kitchen sink with a pile of dirty dishes and with a pile of dirty diapers on the floor at her feet, that she just couldn't take any more. And so she took off her apron and just walked out the door. Sometimes she would call home to check on her children and on those occasions he would tell her just how much he loved her and he would ask her to come back home. Each time, however, she refused.

After a number of days, he hired a private detective to find his wife. The report said that she was living in a second class hotel in Des Moines. He packed his bags, placed the children under the care of a neighbor and took a bus to Des Moines. He found the hotel and made his way to her door. When he knocked on the door of the room, his hand trembled because he didn't know what kind of reception he would receive. His wife opened the door, stood for a moment looking at him in shocked silence and then fell apart in his arms.

Later...at home...when the children were in bed and all was quiet, he asked her a question that had long troubled him.

"Why wouldn't you tell me where you were when you called?
You knew I loved you. Why didn't you come home?"

She replied,

"Because your love was just words. Now I know how much
you love me because you came.

CLOSING "God so loved the world". He came. Someone in this room may be living a life of what Thoreau called, "quiet desperation". Sometimes you may feel that you can't hold on any longer. "Position doubtful". You need to be reminded that God has not forsaken you.

Who knows...like Isaiah's people a sin may have snared you and will not let you go...let you be free. Or perhaps God has been silent for a long time in your heart. Does He seem far away? Ask yourself, "who's moved?" Do not give up. He will come. You shall see His salvation. Isaiah cried out to God, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens...that you would come down".

He did come, my friend. And He comes again and again to those who hearts are turned toward Him. If Isaiah's plaintive cry is your silent cry, let each Christmas light, each delightful carol, each sign of His coming be to you a reminder that God is always faithful to His promises and that He willYES...He will come to you.

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence in these moments
O God. As the winds of faith and love once again sweep across our world, may they caress our hearts as well. Remind us that You are faithful to Your promises, that You have come and will come again to lift us up. Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your healing presence, those whom we mention in our thoughts at this time. Now, touch our souls and our hearts where they need to be touched. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, December 2, 1990

I. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation...pleased you are here with us. Join us downstairs following the service for some refreshments. Be free in the sharing of your name with us. Fill out a visitor card. Sign one of the Guest Books. Come and worship with us again. Work with us, too, in the programs of service...
- B. Doing the Lord's work here since 1837. Roots of the church are deep in the soil of this part of the city. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit...
Members: be sure to wear your name tags downstairs and make a point of meeting two new people here today.

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Be sure to pick up your copy of the December issue of our monthly news sheet. Copies are by the door and on the table downstairs.
- B. December is a busy month and we invite you to share in the programs and activities that will be taking place in the weeks ahead. Two weeks from today is the Christmas pageant and party for the children as well as the Adult Fellowship Caroling party. And include Handel's Messiah as part of your Christmas celebration. December 17th. Our own Lyndon Woodside will be conducting the Oratorio Society.
- C. Envelopes are in the pews now for the Christmas flowers and decorations. What we receive helps to determine how many wreaths and trees we have around the church. Be generous and lets make it look like Christmas!

III. FINANCIAL CANVASS ...

- A. The annual fund-raising effort - "Financial Canvass" is now "winding down". We still have a ways to go. The response thus far has been excellent...with pledges totalling \$ gratefully received.
- B. We would "gently" encourage those of you who have not yet responded to do so...to let us know what you hope to give to the Church in 1991. Do it today...so we can "wrap" things up. "Pledging" is a good spiritual discipline for each Christian... as well as a sound business like way of running a church.

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IV. "CONVERSATIONS IN MEMBERSHIP"

- A. New members will be received into the Church next Sunday during the first part of the service. If you feel a tug in this direction, mention it to me...and try to come this evening to the Membership Conversations to be held at 6:30 in the Russell Room.
- B. Wesley's words: "If your heart is as my heart is, then come and give me your hand." Hearts and hands are needed to do the Lord's work in this place and at this time. It's a tough ministry and we need committed Christians...to stand up and be counted and help to keep this church alive and vital in ministry.

V. OFFERING

"It is more blessed to give than to receive". In this spirit let us worship God with our morning offering.

VI. LIFT UP IN YOUR PRAYER:

- A. Karen Oldham...Mt. Sinai, 6th Floor, Klingenstein Pavilion. Off of Fifth Avenue....talked to her around 10...feeling great following surgery.

VII. WEDDING

- A. Lovely wedding here yesterday afternoon...Kim Hinson and Scott Taylor...new friends worshipping with us this past year... Some wedding cake...a bit left over and we'll have it downstairs at the coffee hour...so come on downstairs and wish Scott and Kim the very best...here today...and also meet Kim mother, Linda Hinson, here from South Carolina...

ADVENT SUNDAY / ADVENT BANNER AND WREATH

ADVENT SUNDAY Today is Advent Sunday...the beginning of a new Church year....the Sunday that ushers in the Christmas Season. From here on it's OK to sing the Christmas carols and to send out the cards.

Advent Sunday is special for us and that's why the children are down here...to sing and then to light the first candle on our Advent wreath.

We have the first of our red Advent banners hanging over here on the wall. As you know from past years, each Sunday in Advent...and there are four Sundays....has a special word or special emphasis. Today it is HOPE...and this is our HOPE banner.

We have new red banners this year....thanks to Mrs. D'Ambrosio of our church. She's sitting right here behind you and on behalf of every one here I would say a special "thank you" to Mrs. D'Ambrosio for her careful and loving work in doing these banners for us. They are beautiful. Mrs. D'Ambrosio did the work and Mr. Raeburn gave the red felt. Our thanks to both Norma and Bob for this gift.

WREATH Now we're going to light the first candle on our Advent wreath. The candle that speaks to us of HOPE. Jesus always brings hope into our lives. Matthew Klein is going to light that candle but before he does the children are going to sing for us.

We invite you to gather now on the steps around the candle, the wreath...following your song then we shall light the candle and usher in the Christmas with a prayer.

PRAYER

"We thank you, O God, for the light that came into our world in the birth of Jesus...and for the hope that He always brings.

We thank you for the banner on the wall that reminds us that He continues to be the HOPE of our world.

For these touches of red and green that remind us that Christmas is coming, we thank you. In the name and spirit of Christ we pray." Amen.

HYMN

No 216 "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"