

# God Comes Near

Proper 7/5afterPent

Pastor Josh Frazee

Isaiah 65:1-9

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Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every year, a certain pastor would preach the same sermon on New Year's Eve. His text was Luke 13: the parable of the barren fig tree. Hear again the parable:

“(Jesus) told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, “Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and have found none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?” And he answered him, “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’”

You know as well as I that this parable is about our response to God's love in coming to us. He has come to you through the waters of Holy Baptism, through His Word, and through His Son's very body and blood given and shed for you. He has come and given you faith, so where is the response?

At a funeral yesterday morning, Pastor Emrick was quick to point out that too often our response is not what it should be. We have our children baptized, but we do not bring them to hear the Word frequently as we promised we would do in the sponsorship vows. We are confirmed and promise to continue to come and hear God's Word—and that we would rather be killed or die than stop—but we stop coming on a frequent basis just a few months or years following confirmation.

We, like the Israelites to whom Isaiah was writing, live in a world where we are surrounded by those who do not believe in the one, true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are called by Him through His Word to be in the world, but not of the world. Yet are we too often like those to whom Isaiah wrote in our Old Testament text this morning?

## Verse 1

In our text, Isaiah wrote the Word of God to his fellow Israelites: “I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here am I, here am I,’ to a nation that was not called by my name. I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks; who sit in tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat pig's flesh, and broth of tainted meat is in their vessels; who say, ‘Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.’”

Again, we know and confess that we do not come near to God but that God comes near to us. He comes to us through His Word. But do we refuse Him? Do you follow your own devices? Do you provoke God to His face? Remember that He is in all places.

Do you consult the advice of the dead? That is actually a practice of the occult. It is one thing to speak thoughts you wished you had spoken to them or to wish that they were still here. It is another to expect them to answer you. They are no longer here. They are with the Lord in His heavenly throne room, where we hope to go should Christ not return first. If Christ Jesus does return first, then our hope is to enter into the new heaven and new earth with Him. To be changed in the twinkling of an eye, and for our mortal bodies to put on immortality, as we so often hear from God's Word at funerals.

Do you spend the night in secret places? It is one thing to be a night owl and to do your work or to practice a hobby at night. It is another to do sinful things at night when you think no one is looking. Whether any other human is looking, God is still watching. He is always watching.

God desires for us to come to hear His Word and to live as His dear children, but do we instead, by word or actions, say, “Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you”?

### Verse 2

“These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all the day. Behold, it is written before me: ‘I will not keep silent, but I will repay; I will indeed repay into their bosom both your iniquities and your fathers’ iniquities together, says the Lord; because they made offerings on the mountains and insulted me on the hills, I will measure into their bosom payment for their former deeds.’”

If you’ve ever smelled incense, you know how strong it can be. How sweet it is. Yet this is a smell the Lord welcomed by command in His holy temple in the Old Testament. At the time of this writing, however, the smell He smelled was not incense offered in faith to Him, but the aroma of the worship of false gods, of faithless deeds, and the vanity of Israel (ESV Study Bible, p.1195).

As strong as incense may be to your nostrils, the scent of idolatry was constantly and heavily in the nostrils of the Lord in the days of Isaiah. Is it much better today? Most certainly the Lord still hates sin, and has wrath against those who sin as though He does not exist—those who do not believe the Word written about Him. But is it any better for those who believe and do it anyway? No, Scripture says, it is worse. Peter wrote in his second letter: “For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.”

But this is not referring to the Law and the Ten Commandments only, but about the whole testimony of the Scriptures, the Law and the Gospel. In other words, it is a warning not to turn from the whole counsel of God found in Christ Jesus—not just that you are a sinner according to the Law, but also that Jesus has suffered and died to make satisfaction for your sins, and has sent His Holy Spirit, who has called you by the Gospel, enlightened you with His gifts, and is sanctifying and keeping you in the true faith.

Many of the Israelites lost that trust of God’s Word, and God measured their deeds back to them. However, God did save a remnant—the remnant who believed on the promise of a coming Savior, whose Name would be revealed to be Jesus Christ. So, too, even today, many do not trust on this Name for their salvation, but God will not throw out the good with the evil. Just look at the final verses of our text.

### Verse 3

“Thus says the Lord: ‘As the new wine is found in the cluster, and they say, “Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it,” so I will do for my servants’ sake, and not destroy them all. I will bring forth offspring from Jacob, and from Judah possessors of my mountains; my chosen shall possess it, and my servants shall dwell there.’”

Jesus spoke up for the Israelites even before His coming, saying, “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” Many of the Israelites would be found not bearing the fruit of faith, but some did—the remnant, whose descendants would be saved both by King Cyrus, and by Jesus Christ.

Jesus went to the cross of Calvary bearing the sins of all the world, but it would only be those who trusted, who trust today, and who will trust in His Name who will receive the benefits. The remnant from Isaiah's time did, and were spared. You also, as you bear the fruits of trusting the Lord—fruits which may not be easily seen or apparent, yet are still there as you receive the manure and care of God's Word to produce growth—you will receive the blessings of Christ's death and resurrection. And so will all who follow in the faithful footsteps of the current remnant, the Church.

Thanks be to God our Father who has promised not to throw out the faithful with the unfaithful. Thanks be to God the Son, Jesus the Christ, who went to the cross of Calvary with your sins and mine and paid for them, and who still intercedes on our behalf before the Father. And thanks be to God the Holy Spirit, who has been sent into our lives to keep us in the one true faith to life everlasting.  
In Jesus' Name. Amen.