

Thirteen years ago when I told my parents I would be visiting a prison every week while I was pastor in Cameron, Missouri, my mother thought about that for a moment, and then asked, “Are there any murderers there?” I was 48 years old, but she was still looking after me. I told her the truth, “No. The prison I visit doesn’t have murderers.” At least, I thought that was the truth. Later, I learned otherwise. As I got to know the offenders who came to our weekly mass, some of them told me their stories. Before my first year ended, I met several guys who had committed involuntary homicide. They hadn’t intended to kill someone, but they got drunk or angry or careless, and because of their actions somebody died. Five of our murderers wrote their stories up as chapters of a book; four of them were Catholic. So was the guy who edited the book; he was a Catholic murderer too. One consistent theme they told was this: None of them had a very good father. In every case their father had abandoned them or abused them verbally or physically. Yet this was another common theme: They did not blame their father. They took full responsibility for their actions. They knew they had choices, and they frequently made the wrong ones.

In today’s reading from the prophecy of Isaiah, the people of Israel call out to God from the midst of their distress. They call God their father, which is actually quite rare in the Old Testament. And they blame their sorry condition on God. They say, “You, Lord, are our father. Why do you let us wander from your ways, and [you] harden our hearts so that we fear you not?” The people knew that they were sinners who had given up on God. But they took no responsibility. They said it’s God’s fault. God has not been a very good father. By the end of this reading, though, the mood shifts. They say, “we are sinful. We have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind.” At the end, they use the same title for God: “You are our father.” At the beginning they also call God their redeemer. They remind God that because of the covenant he should help them in their need. At the end they also call God their potter. They are like clay. God can shape them and make them better. God doesn’t have to change. God can change them.

It’s not hard to find people who blame God for their misfortune. Sometimes we’ve done it ourselves. What helped Isaiah’s people change from blaming God to admitting their sin? In the middle of this passage they utter a prayer filled with strong images. They say, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you, while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for, such as they had not heard of from of old.” Israel wanted God to make a dramatic entrance, to rip open the sky, make mountains shake, and impress everyone with marvelous deeds.

That prayer changed the hearts of the people in today’s first reading, and that’s the prayer that starts Advent for us in 2014. During Advent we want God to come. We aren’t simply remembering that God did come as an infant in Bethlehem. No, we want God to come now, to rip open the heavens, come down here, make mountains shake and do mighty deeds. We don’t need to blame anyone else for our condition. We just need confidence in God who saves.