

Our prayers on Thanksgiving Day are usually well-mannered. Once a year we set aside a day to thank God for family, food, faith and country. But throughout the rest of the year, we often interrupt God with our urgent needs. We want things to be different, and we want God to do something about it, preferably now. God is used to prayers like this.

In the sixth century BC the Israelites left their captivity in Babylon and went home free to Jerusalem. They were ecstatic. But Jerusalem was completely devastated. They had to rebuild from the ground up. Imagine a tornado has ripped through your neighborhood and you have to leave the disaster area for a while. Imagine coming back. You are happy to see your property again, but discouraged by how much you have lost and how much you must restore. Israel getting back to Jerusalem probably felt like that.

To these people came the prophecy we heard as today's first reading from Isaiah. Enemies – not a tornado – had destroyed their land, but the prophet says Israel's own sin brought this about. He says, "We are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds are like polluted rags; we have all withered like leaves and our guilt carries us away like the wind." But the prophet also blames God for the sins of the people: "Why, O Lord, do you let us wander from your ways, and why do you harden our hearts?" The prophet admits the people were guilty but blames God for not helping. God is the father; we are the children. God is the potter; we are the clay. If God made us the way we are, sins and all, God should get us out of this mess. It's a sassy prayer – this first reading – and God did not have to answer it. Parents and potters make things, but they don't know how the product will finish.

This passage appears on the First Sunday of Advent because of one line. The prophet prays, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, working awesome deeds we could not hope for." Get us out of this mess. Tear open the heavens and come down here. We pray like this when we fear the advance of terrorism, the threat of smallpox, divisions in the family, danger on the road – or lumps in the gravy. "God, help us," we pray.

We pray at the beginning of Advent for God to tear open the heavens, because we believe at the end of Advent, that is what happens. God rips open the heavens, comes down to Bethlehem and starts working awesome deeds we could not have hoped for. God answers this sassy prayer.

If our prayers sometimes seem ill-mannered, God is used to that. Those prayers might get answered. God will act with justice even if we do not. Advent reminds us that in spite of our sin, God sends a Savior.