And, at first, *we were stuck,*too, with “stay at home” orders. No restaurants. No church. No sporting activities. No nothing. And *we are still stuck.* We all went through this. We know the angst, the pain, the silent suffering, the fear, and the loss of hope. We missed our loved ones.

Even though we could Zoom, FaceTime, or Google Meet, we missed touching a face, hugging, laughing, and crying together. We lost something precious – human contact – and we want it back. We want a return to normal, a glimmer of hope, a restoration of relationships, and for things to be like they used to be.

This is the emotional, psychological, and spiritual context of Isaiah’s text this morning. Israel’s glory is long faded. 150 years before, the Assyrian army swept away the northern kingdom, and now, the recollection of life in Judea and temple worship is but a faint memory. Carried into captivity, the Israelites are exiles in a foreign land, a consequence of their scandalous behavior. They neglected their worship of God and lived in open rebellion against God. Their rulers set up false idols, pursued greed, and practiced corruption. They showed no regard for the poor and disposed. They refused to listen to God’s prophets.

Israel did not experience prosperity or enjoy any blessings from the hand of God for a long time. God seemed very far away, and the people wondered had God abandoned them? “You have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity” (v. 7b).

In captivity, in a strange land, the Israelites recalled the glory of their past. They remembered how God intervened and how God saved them from their enemies. They recalled how God walked with them daily in the wilderness. They longed to know and experience the presence of God again. Thus, Isaiah’s reading opens with the anguished words: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

It sounds as if the Israelites forgot that God *loves* to visit! God is a visiting God. The Bible begins with the God not only bringing creation into being but visiting our first parents, walking with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. God visited Abraham in the guise of angels who shared a meal. God visited Jacob, wrestling with him in the night. God visited Moses in the burning bush on Mount Sinai. God’s presence went with the Israelites through the wilderness in the form of fire and cloud. God visited Samuel as a boy, calling him out of his sleep to serve. God visited Elijah in a still, small voice.

Still, Isaiah cries, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” The prophet knows that it is in God’s nature to visit us. “When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down” (v. 3). The prophet says, in effect, “You used to visit us a lot. What gives? Why aren’t you coming around anymore? Please, come for a visit — soon!” Yes, it is in God’s nature to visit, and this year (perhaps more than ever!) we want a visit from God. God is willing and eager to visit, and even to stay a while!

The prophet feels as though the people are in some sort of quarantine. The people must be infected. There must be *some*reason God stays away. Knowing that God is a just God, Isaiah suspects that something is wrong: “You meet those who gladly do right,” he says. (v. 5), and he knows that God works for those who “wait for him” (v. 4, echoing Lamentations 3:25).

Recognizing the long time since God’s last visit to the people, Isaiah complains that God is absent, forcing God’s own people to an unwelcome quarantine. No visits. No meals left at the door. No face to face encounters. No Zoom. No nothing. Because the people infected the relationship with sin and idolatry, God hid God’s Self from them (v. 5c). Now, says Isaiah, even though they attempt “to take hold of you…you have hidden your face from us” (v. 7).

Now, some of the Israelite are returning, but their homeland is in turmoil. They need God to visit them. The city of Jerusalem lies in ruins. The temple is destroyed. The walls need to be rebuilt to keep the people safe. When will God visit again? “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal” (Lamentations 1:1).

 Today is the first Sunday of Advent. We are preparing for God to visit once again. We know there is going to be a reopening. “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuelwhich means, ‘God is with us’” (Matthew 1:23).

We know that God did, indeed, tear open the heavens and come to us. “Though [Jesus] was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form” (Philippians 2:6-7).

What kind of visit will this be? How will we receive God? We are still a people in a strange land, exiled from one another by our sinful ways and selfish natures. We long for our heavenly home. We, too, would like a visit. Yet, this is precisely the promise of Christmas: Immanuel! God with us. God with us during shut-down and stay-at-home orders. God with us in quarantine. God with us throughout social distancing. God will visit us again.

Carol Willison mourns the passing of her mother, Lillian, and yet at the same time, she recently welcomed her first grandchild, a boy, into the world. There is a baby in the family now, and babies are such miracles of wonder and hope and love and joy. There is no visitation quite like the arrival of a baby.

Think of Mary and Joseph on that night long ago. We may not know the details of this divine visitation, but it was a *wonderful* event in which the heavens were rent, and God, in the person of a small baby, paid humankind the most important visit of all. Amid the darkness of the world, God continues to visit us today. May Advent be a time when we not only prepare for the visit but experience the fullness of God’s presence every day!

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**Please, Come Visit!**

1st Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2020 Isaiah 64:1-9

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In May 2020, Lillian Yu-Feng Hsu, 87, died in an assisted-living facility in White Plains, New York. Lillian grew up in China during WWII, and later studied medicine in Taiwan. Then she moved to the United States to complete a medical internship. “I knew I had to become educated so I could be totally independent,” she wrote in her memoirs.

Lillian became a doctor and a geneticist. Lillian often found herself to be the only foreigner and the only woman in her class, office, or lab. She later told her grandchildren about the difficulties of dealing with inconsiderate men while working to the top of her field. Lillian set up the first lab in New York City that performed amniocentesis, setting the international standard for prenatal diagnostic testing.

When Lillian died, none of her family members could be with her. They did chat with her via Zoom for a two-week period before she passed. But at her burial, there were only 10 people present and they had to maintain a safe, “social distance.”

Lillian’s daughter, Carol, was unable to join family members to grieve and to share. Carol lives in Shanghai where she teaches elementary school. Carol’s husband, the Rev. John P. Willison, is the lead pastor of a large international congregation there. Had Carol left Shanghai, she might not have been able to *return*to Shanghai due to China’s inflexible COVID restrictions. Carol was stuck: separated from her dying mother if she stayed; separated from her husband and risking the loss of her teaching position if she went.

Carol’s experience was like thousands of others at the height of the pandemic. Quarantine rules, canceled flights, and complicated entry strategies stranded many people far from home. Family members remained isolated for the safety of other family members.