

First Sunday of Advent November 29, 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37

Our reading comes from the Gospel of Mark, the focus of our gospel readings in this new liturgical year. Mark's is a gospel in a hurry. The shortest of the four gospels at 16 chapters, able to be read in a couple of hours if you read at a decent pace. It wastes no time because the author of Mark and the assembly he is writing to believe that they don't have much time at all before Jesus will come again. Before their own suffering and pain will be over and the Son of Man will come in great power and glory and send out the angels to call forth the elect from the four corners of the earth.

And they needed saving. They live with the reality of the bloody fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple at the hands of the Roman legions in the recent past. An event where blood literally ran in the streets. They live with the threat of persecution for their faith in Jesus. They live in a tenuous relationship with the society around them. Always on the brink of disaster because of what they believed.

And so, the author of Mark did what many people raised in the Jewish tradition had done before him. He reached back into the depths of the tradition for a way to describe the hope that lay within them despite all these challenges... the language of the literary form called an apocalypse. One author describes the form as "crisis literature". Apocalypses were written in times of great turbulence and trouble and use fantastic and mythical imagery to bring hope into the lives of those believers reading it. The hope of divine intervention and salvation in the

face of overwhelming trials. The hope that these events are not the final word in their story.

The language of an apocalypse is vivid, scary, over the top, “the sun will be darkened and the moon not give its light, the stars falling from heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” Wild and frightening imagery, but the message is clear... The natural order of things is in disarray. All is not as it should be.

And those people of faith who are caught in the middle do what they always do... cry out to God in the voice of our text from Isaiah, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” O God that you would attend to us. Come into this place now and DO something.

Do you hear this text differently this year than in past ones? More than others in the recent past it has been a year of tumult, of all not being as it should be. The natural order of things shaken. A year when we have seen pictures from the West Coast of a sky blackened in the early afternoon by wildfires raging. A pandemic that keeps us from interacting with family and friends as we might normally do. Hurricanes and tropical storms taking a number to line up and smash into our Gulf Coast. Tensions within our political system outside the norm; brother hating brother for the color of their skin, fellow Americans despising one another for where they live or who they vote for.

We too cry out, “O God! That you would tear open the heavens and come down.” Come down now Lord and do something! Extinguish the fires that rage and devastate. Vanquish the virus that steals our breath, your very Spirit from our bodies. That sickens and kills so many. Calm the storms that churn on the oceans

as you calmed the Sea of Galilee with just a word. Bring peace into our hearts, the love for one another you have for us. Tear open the heavens and come down!

But here is the thing, the Gospel of Mark tells us that this has already happened. God has torn open the heavens and come down. It has happened in the person of Jesus, at whose baptism we are told the heavens were ripped in two and the Spirit of God descended like a dove on him and a voice from heaven spoke, “You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased!” It has already happened, as affirmed by the curtain in the Temple being torn in two as Jesus breathed his last on the cross, forever tearing apart any barrier that lay between God and God’s people. Those who cry out for salvation!

Even though the cries and these texts come out of terrible and terrifying times, they are still expressions of hope. Of trust. For the demand to come down. The demand to do something, is only made if you believe that it will result in action. Some kind of response. Otherwise you’re just spittin’ into the wind.

“O God! That you would tear open the heavens and come down.” This is an expression of hope as much as it is one of frustration.

Advent is my favorite season of the church year. Part of that is the color we use, a deep royal blue, but also because it best expresses the reality that we who believe that Jesus Christ is God’s only Son live in time differently from everyone else. For we are not just in the season of winter, but also of Advent. A season of watching, waiting, wondering. A season of hope. One that is anticipating the birth of the Messiah on December 25 (even though we know he has already been born) and

one that is meant to keep us awake to the expected return of that Crucified and Risen Jesus. We live in time both waiting for Jesus to be born and to come again.

The reality is that Advent was originally more about the latter. Like the believers the author of Mark is writing to, the early church was looking for Jesus to come again and that right soon. The season of Advent was even a little longer than it is now and you can hear it in the readings we have had most of this month of November, ones about absent landlords coming back unexpectedly. Ones about the need to do the work you have been given, to use the talents you have, to act as if the owner was coming back not tomorrow, but tonight, the next hour, the next minute.

In Mark, the language is “Keep awake!” Literally, not sleeping, without sleep. Keep awake and watch for Jesus with the same fervor we did as kids waiting for Santa Claus to come down the chimney to eat his milk and cookies. With the same expectation that we have for the return of a loved one from a deployment overseas or a long trip.

Keep awake! Aware and observant so that you might see the signs of his coming. But...don't expect that you can predict when that return will be. This is not like keeping an eye out the window for your parents to return so you can turn the Playstation off and get back to your homework. This is not, “Jesus is coming so look busy”. It is also not, “Out of sight, out of mind”. Rather, it is about a life lived in the expectation that it could be in the next minute, the next second that Jesus, our master, our savior will come. How then shall we greet him? With lamps filled with faith and well-trimmed wicks? With reports of talents well used?

Advent is a season for keeping awake, of not being lulled to sleep by the delay of the return of our savior. Advent is a season of hope, because we know that Jesus is already risen, that Christ is with us always to the end of the age, not in the same way he will be when he comes in glory but in truth just the same. Advent is a season for re-orienting ourselves both to God and to the world.

Advent is also a safety valve. You hear it in the language of the demand to come down, to save. Advent gives us a yearly opportunity to shout our fears, our demands, our expectations, our hope into the heavens. To cry to God with all the frustration that has built up over the year. To release it, not with a useless spewing into the wind to be swept away, but with a clear shouting into God's ear that then is answered. In four short weeks. In the celebration of the birth of Emmanuel, God with us. God who has torn the heavens apart and come down to us- not in the epic imagery of the apocalypse with blazing light, thunderclaps and glory. But instead on a quiet night, in the birth of a baby surrounded by the animals, announced only to the shepherds.

Advent is a season of hope, because it recognizes that only God can save us. Listen to the language from our scriptures. From Isaiah, "You are the potter, we are the clay." Our ability to mold ourselves is limited, it is only God who can shape and mold us into God's own image. Every time we encounter the Word of God spoken, written, prayed, it flows around our souls and molds us a little more into what God has called us to be.

From the Psalm, "Restore us O Lord God of hosts, let your face shine on us and we shall be saved!" The word used for restore is the same one used for repent, to turn around. Only God can turn us around, turn us back from the destructive

paths we travel. Only God can save us from despair. Only the light of God's face can show us the way. The way of Jesus who is the Light of the World.

We have hope this Advent, for the apostle Paul might well have been writing to us in his letter to the Corinthians.

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched, brought to fullness in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

During this Advent season, may we keep awake as we Watch, Wait, and Wonder... for the one who says everything we need to know about God. For the one who is our salvation. For the one who has given us all we need. For the one in whom rests all our hope. Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.