

December 3, 2023 Rev Beth Orling

Advent 1B. Dec. 3, 2023. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA. Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18, I Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37. "Advent Blues"

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
² as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
⁴ From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
⁵ You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
⁷ There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13:24-37

‘But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. ‘From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

The Sermon

How haunting that first line from Isaiah this morning! “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” (Isaiah 64:1) The prophet longs for God to intervene in the world.

Oh, that God would silence the man cursing his wife,

Oh, that God would move food from the overflowing plates of the rich to the empty tables of the poor,

Oh, that God would protect the little child from the angry bully or the abusive parent,

Oh, that God would cure the cancers, the addictions, the sicknesses,

Oh, that God would provide safe houses for elders, for those who are homeless!

Oh, that God would give some wisdom and compassion to our government leaders,

Oh, that God would turn the hearts of terrorists to ways of justice, and stop the wars,

Oh, that we might listen to good news rather than the distressing stories and reports we hear and see these days,

Oh, that this Advent we might find the true meaning of Christ’s peace!

When we pray from such depths of feeling, adding our own deepest personal needs, we are right there with the prophet Isaiah and all who pray in hope for God to intervene. Last week a delegation of Christian pastors from Bethlehem in Palestine traveled to Washington, D.C., to beg our leaders to work for a lasting ceasefire and peace in the Middle East.

There is no peace in the little town of Bethlehem this year. There is no work for those who care for tourists who normally flock to this West Bank town at Christmas time. Decorations will not be put up. There is constant fear. For some today's reading has come true: the sun is darkened, the moon gives no light, and heaven and earth are passing away – along with countless people and their homes.

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As we come into the church season of Advent, we see the color blue all around us here. Our days are increasingly dark. If we are honest with ourselves, many of us suffer the Advent and winter BLUES. If our world news were not enough, our readings today give us a glimpse of the dark night longings of the soul.

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Today we begin a year-long reading of the Gospel of Mark. Mark is probably the earliest Gospel, also the shortest, likely written during the time that the Jews rebelled against Rome and perhaps just before or shortly after the temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. Believers were being persecuted and arrested; many of the original disciples had been martyred. The loss of these eyewitnesses created the need for a written account of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Ancient Christian tradition says that this Gospel reflects Peter's memories and witness.

Today's apocalyptic verses in Mark sound ominous: the sun will be darkened, the stars will fall. But they will not *feel* ominous when we sing our closing hymn today. "My Lord, what a morning – when the stars begin to fall." The people who originally sang that hymn – slaves oppressed in our American South – celebrated the idea that the end times would be a blessing for them. Living in a time of suffering, they looked forward to that day of relief.

Signs in the sun and moon have always existed, so it is always time to be ready for the new age, the last days, the end of time, our own deaths, the return of Christ.

And Jesus says, "Keep awake!" Some of us are way too good at that; we wish we could stop the night-time worries, the longings, the regrets. Some of us can't sleep because loved ones need us late at night. Some of us can't keep awake because we're depressed, and sleep provides an escape – or we are just plain exhausted from the work of the day. Even Jesus' beloved disciples -- just a couple days after he gave them this stern advice to keep awake – fell asleep when he asked them to pray with him in Gethsemane's garden.

Jesus walked the road to the cross -- alert, awake and aware -- bearing death and the grave. The sun was indeed darkened that Good Friday noon on Calvary's hill. Jesus did that so that we might not fear death nor anything that might ever happen.

Mark wrote his Gospel for Christians who were worried about the delayed answer to their prayers and expectations that Christ would come again soon. Sometimes we watch and wait for change, or for healing, or for reconciliation, or for Christ to become more real in our lives. We don't always know how to handle the delayed answers to our prayers.

Mark reminds us in verse 32, "About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." We can't control the return of Christ; we can't control the world situation or our economy; we can't even control ourselves sometimes. So, like our friends in Twelve-step programs, we turn our lives over to a faithful God, to a higher power.

This faithful God enables us to practice living the **faith** that remains open to the challenges life keeps putting before us. The challenge for some of us is to "keep on keeping on" in difficult situations. The challenge for others is to take charge of our lives, so that life does not pass us by and we don't miss our calling, our vocation.

Our Lord Jesus IS coming among us. Through the dark night, God knits tiny cells together, God prepares a baby to enter this world.

The baby grows while we are plumbing and painting, texting and calculating, cooking and cleaning, singing and sighing. It's easier to Keep Awake when – there's so much going on, we don't even *want* to sleep!

God calls us to be the angels who are entrusted with the work of gathering people from every place: from the edges of society, from the end of the pew, from the corners into which the winds of churchly or worldly establishments have blown them. And as we gather, we are gathered. As we bless, we are blessed.

We struggle with our own personal BLUEs, with the stresses, drowsiness, or disillusionment of these darkest and rainiest of our days. We wrestle with the angels and the demons in our lives. We want God to tear open the heavens and make things right. Yet, though we are imperfect, we are beloved. Though fragile, important. Though flawed, beautiful. Though worried, redeemed.

And, God DOES tear open the heavens and reach down to earth. He uses OUR hands, our voices, our lives to accomplish those things for which we so earnestly pray.

How will we "keep awake" this season? How will we practice an active hope, how will we seek to align ourselves with God's dream of peace and well-being for all?

Be awake to the small stories of hope that you hear or see this week. Be awake to the faith that sustains one of your friends or the joy someone can't wait to share. Take comfort in the forgiveness you receive; forgive and reconcile with another.

As we hear the prayers and struggles of our siblings in Palestine and Israel, let us re-double our prayers and actions for an end to warfare and lasting safety and security for the peoples of both those – and all nations. Let us pray to God on their behalf, support peace initiatives, write to our legislators, and make donations to Episcopal Relief and Development to support healing work in the Middle East.

As we hear the prayers and struggles of our friends and neighbors here, we also can pray for peace for them, for lasting security and wholeness.

In Advent we long for the promise of what IS but is also NOT YET. When you prepare your manger scenes at home, perhaps there are only a few animals right now. Next week a shepherd or two. The next week Mary and Joseph.

Finally, four weeks from today, there's a tiny baby in our manger scenes. Only a tiny baby. But we know that through that baby we will claim the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ who lived and died and was raised so that we would see the light at the end of the tunnel of blue darkness. So that we could remember that the BLUE of Advent is also the color of the heavens and of hope. God is faithful and calls you into fellowship with Jesus. That's the good news this morning. Amen.