

For Those Who Wait
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Isaiah 64:1-9

¹ 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

²⁴ ‘But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.
²⁶ Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. ²⁷ 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.
²⁸ ‘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. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at

the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² ‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It 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. ³⁵Therefore, 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, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

We start Advent on a surprising tone – one of lamentation and apocalypse. Knowing that we are preparing for the birth of a child, the one who is God-with-us, it seems remarkably un-joyous. Isaiah, in our first reading, is speaking on behalf of an exiled people, a people who see causality between their turning away from God and God’s hiding from them. They are desperate for God to intervene, at the very least to return, for things have gotten very difficult. As they say, through Isaiah, “for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity,” our wickedness. They are now paying the price for their bad choices, have remorse for their choices, and are asking for God’s help in turning around their fate. They are lamenting and, in true form to a lamentation, there is no shortage of praise for God and God’s past works for them. And, when God worked for them before, God’s arrival was marked with grand flourish via earthquake, shaking the mountains, so that all the earth would know God had come down.

Our reading from Mark is not framed as the people speaking to God, like in Isaiah, but God, in the form of Jesus, speaking to the people. What we read is the heavenly counterpoint to the people’s perspective from Isaiah. In this reading from Isaiah, he speaks of tremendous natural events; Jesus speaks of tremendous cosmic events. Both portend God’s arrival. It’s important to know, not unlike other times in Jesus’ ministry, he references what we call the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament. In his day, this is something all who claimed to have come in the name of the Lord would do. You see, the people under the Roman Empire were suffering in a way very similar to the way of which Isaiah speaks, dominated by, and subservient to, another culture. They were looking for a deliverer just as much as Isaiah’s people were. As such, there were many who were assigned the title “Messiah,” in hopes that they really were the king sent by God to save the Jews.¹ To demonstrate their “Godsentness,” pointing back to the Hebrew scriptures only made sense. Of course, for Jesus, he did so legitimately as the Messiah, the one sent by God, for the Jews and for all peoples.

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/messiah>.

In this teaching, Jesus reaches back to Isaiah, Joel, Ezekiel, and Daniel,² claiming a long line of prophetic belief on how the end of times would look and saying, “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.” This reading actually begins with “But in those days, after that suffering.” You may ask “what suffering?” Earlier in the same chapter of Mark, Jesus says, “But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be...then those in Judea must flee to the mountains...For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be.”³ The message to a suffering and oppressed people is “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” Not particularly joyous.

However dire the tone may seem, these readings do, indeed, lead us well into Advent. Who are we but also a people of lament? No matter our viewpoints on the trial in Ferguson, Missouri, we can agree what has happened to that community and the still-present racial divide that is brought into stark relief in light of the events there are heartbreaking and wholly worthy of our lament. On any given day in our country there are innumerable reasons for lament. Innocent lives ended by violence, people hungry, people without shelter, people without protection, the losses which can be credited to addiction. Those are just generalizations; we can name our own personal reasons to weep. And our country is what the world considers well-off when compared to the problems of other nations and other peoples. There is so, so much to lament, so much about which to be sorrowful. You know this, you feel it, sometimes more than others. Sometimes, more than others, we are acutely aware of our uncomfortable vulnerability.

Being reminded of this is an excellent, although maybe unwelcome, way to enter into Advent. Our own need for a savior is heightened. Our longing is made deeper; our waiting, more urgent. Like those Roman-era Jews, we have hopes that one will be sent by God to save us. And, we already know who that is without a need for guessing, without randomly pinning our hopes on potential candidates. So we prepare for his coming, his advent among us. As soon as the fig branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, summer is near, a season of abundance and life. When the dire signs appear, Christ’s advent is near, which, too, brings abundance and life. When we prepare throughout the season of Advent, we prepare for both the newborn who has already arrived and we prepare for Jesus who has not yet come again. Having walked among us once, Jesus has already brought abundance and life into that which threatens us and, when he comes again, the abundance and life, of which we know only partly, will come to full fruition.

² Isaiah 13:10, 34:4; Joel 2:10, 3:15; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Daniel 7:13.

³ Mark 13:14, 19.

It can be easy to feel hopeless. But we, as people of faith, are people who choose hope in the end. Advent is the very intentional reminder that God is coming and has come and is here now; and, with God, wherever God is, there is always hope. With each occasion to mourn, we are moved to pray with Isaiah “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” We **are** those who wait. And for whom do we wait? Our God who is coming to us, and who has already come, is the same God the likes of whom no one has heard, no ear has perceived, and no eye has seen. In our God we hope.

The news outlets seem to finally be catching on that we are tired of seeing simply the worst in humanity. They have begun, in print and in television, to show the good that is happening in Ferguson. Undoubtedly, there are sorrowful scenes there. **But** there are signs of hope, too, of unlikely people hugging, of people of all races supporting one another, protecting one another, protecting each other’s property. As people of faith, we are called to open our eyes to these signs of hope, we are called to demand that these signs of hope not be invisible or overshadowed or ignored, and we are called to help others see hope, too. This is our work as we wait – not only to **not** give up our own hope but to sow hope in others wherever we can. We are preparing to receive Christ and we are preparing others, too. There is always work to be done for those who wait. Jesus says, “Beware, keep alert...Keep awake.” For us that means to be alert to the places where hope needs to be nurtured within ourselves and sown within others. So I say to you, too: Beware, keep alert...Keep awake. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Holy God, we cry out to you for the sake of this world and for the ones we love and for ourselves. Fill us with hope so we might fill others with hope in this world which does not hope enough, we pray. Amen.