

Advent 1, Yr. B  
December 3, 2017  
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Advent is about God coming – traditionally, we think of that coming first as the child in Bethlehem and then at the end of time, at the Second Coming. Someone pointed out, though, that that's thinking too small, thinking, it was suggested, by someone who had only two fingers. In reality, God comes again and again, in history and in our personal lives. These end-of-time scriptures – the mainstream churches often tend to disregard them, probably in direct proportion as some other groups are so obsessed with them that it appears that they are the only scriptures that matter. So I think it's good for us to take a closer look at what they're about.

Certainly they are about the fact that, at some point, God will come to judge the world, and set it to rights. I think we can all agree with that. In that sense, they are about God's righteousness and justice. But, beyond that, they are part of a larger body of apocalyptic literature. We're talked about that before – that apocalypse means something hidden that will be revealed – and the idea is that as awful as things are right now, God has a plan that will be revealed when God finally intervenes and, in the words of Isaiah, comes down. This kind of writing flourished in the inter-testamental period, with writers like Daniel and Ezra, and was in the very air in the years that Jesus and his disciples were living and writing. Apocalyptic thinking and writing flourishes in times of persecution and oppression, when things are so bad that people think that nothing short of God's direct intervention is going to straighten out the mess. It's writing that's designed to give people hope – hang in there, relief is coming.

So, looking first at the reading from Isaiah. This was written after the Jews had returned from the Babylonian exile but before the Temple was rebuilt. The reading is a form of communal lament. It starts in the preceding chapter, which is God's lament. God is grief-stricken because his chosen people have run off the tracks. The prophet is saying that if the people want a healthy and holy nation, they have to start by taking an honest look at their society and what's wrong in it, coupled with an honest acknowledgement of their responsibility. It's not God's indifference that's the problem, says Isaiah, but the people's rebellion against God's will – that's what caused the nation's fall. And in the face of that apocalyptic argument that God should just come and fix it all, Isaiah is saying, NO - this is a call to self-examination and then engagement with a life of justice and compassion. In Chapter 64, which we just heard, the question is WHERE WERE YOU GOD? But in the preceding chapter that question is reversed and it's God asking the people, WHERE WERE YOU? God is challenging his people to break out of their selfishness, complacency and smugness and thereby help to create that new heaven and new earth which are the subject of the following chapter – the New Testament will call that the Kingdom of God.

You'll note that both in this reading and in the psalm, the idea is that if God would just show his face, all would be well. In this reading, it's BECAUSE YOU HID YOURSELF, WE TRANSGRESSED. In the psalm, it's SHOW US THE LIGHT OF YOUR COUNTENANCE ARE

WE SHALL BE SAVED. Both writers seem to be saying: IF WE COULD JUST SEE YOU WE'D BE OK.

But if we're honest, we'd have to ask ourselves how hard we're looking. There's a Hasidic story about a little boy who was playing hide-and-seek with some friends. He had gone off to hide, but the other children had been called in to dinner and no one came to find him. After waiting a long time, he went home and was tearfully telling the story to his Rabbi grandfather, who comforted him and said, "That's also the story of God who says, 'I have hidden myself in the universe, but no one cares enough to even search for me.'" Are we looking?

Some of these same strands appear in the Mark reading, which is also a piece of apocalyptic writing. Mark is using concepts and language out of the OT, mainly from the book of Daniel. It's all part of Jewish religious history. So Mark's listeners would have understood what he meant when he talked about the coming Day of the Lord and about the Son of Man coming on clouds. Mark's listeners would have understood that this apocalyptic language was not meant to be taken literally, but that it was a product of those times of suffering and oppression when writers, trying to express that inexpressible, resorted to dreams and visions. But the suffering was real enough. This book was probably written after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. You'll remember there had been a Jewish revolt and the Roman Titus came to crush it. In the end, he put the city of Jerusalem to siege and starved out the inhabitants. The writing of the Jewish historian Josephus says that 90,000 Jews were taken prisoner, but 1,100,000 were starved to death. To read Josephus' account is to read about a scene of horror. And, in the end, the city fell and the Temple was demolished, with not one stone left upon another, as had been predicted.

Another point to be made about this passage – and that's the very clear statement about no one, not even Jesus, knowing when this was going to happen. In spite of that, however, some Christians seem obsessed with figuring out when this is going to occur. We recently had a prediction – it was supposed to be in October, if I remember correctly. I don't know if was the same fellow who made predictions for 1994, 1995 and 2011 – but he's not alone. Clement of Rome predicted it would be in 90, Martin of Tours guessed it would be in 400, in Y1K, Christians were so panicked that they forgot all about Jesus' teaching on non-violence and tried to beat pagans into conversion because of the coming end. Later Pope Innocent III thought it would be in 1284, the Shakers opted for 1792, Charles Wesley thought 1794 and the Jehovah Witnesses named eight different times, starting around the time of the cataclysm of WWI.

One can sympathize with those who look to God's intervention because the belief is that then all suffering will end – all injustice, poverty, addition, inequality, greed, violence – all of it finally gone. That's the goal. And it's something we all desire. But rather than live in fear and hysteria about the end, the question should be, how do we live in the meantime.

And I suggest that's what the reading from Mark is telling us - how to live right now, while the master is away and before he returns. Think back to those Jews returning from exile – everything was in ruins. They had a choice: wait for God or use what they had to begin to rebuild. They chose to rebuild. There's a story told somewhere about a fellow staying in a hotel in Dublin. His wake up call came 1/2 hour later than he had requested. And then, to add insult

to injury, room service delivered bacon and eggs when he had ordered boiled eggs. And then they gave him *The Irish Times* instead of *The Daily Telegraph*. So he picked up the phone and complained to the desk, and the girl, in a lovely Irish way, responded by saying, "Well now, you're awake and you've got something to eat and something to read while you eat. I'd say you're not badly off!" (Bausch, *Telling Stories*)

We're not badly off, either, and we have more than we need to participate in God's work of bringing the kingdom to fruition. I'd like to close with another story that I think is on point:

There was once a hard-working blacksmith. When the day came for him to die, the angel showed up and the blacksmith refused to go. He pleaded with the angel to make his case before God, that he was the only blacksmith in the area and it was time for planting and sowing and his neighbors needed him. So the angel did and told God that the man wasn't ungrateful and was glad to have a place in heaven, but would like to put off going for a while. About a year later the angel came back with the same message – the Lord was ready to share the fullness of the kingdom with the blacksmith. Again, the man hesitated and added, "You know, I'd really like to, but a neighbor of mine is seriously ill and it's time for the harvest. A number of us are trying to save his crops so his family won't become destitute." And so it was put off again. In fact, it became a pattern. Whenever the angel showed up the blacksmith had one excuse or another. Finally the blacksmith grew old and tired and he prayed to tell God that if he'd like to send the angel again, he was ready. The angel appeared immediately and the blacksmith said, "If you still want to take me home, I'm ready to live forever in the kingdom of God." And the angel laughed and looked at the blacksmith in delight and surprised and said, "Where do you think you've been all these years?" (*Parables*, McKenna)

Living awake kingdom lives right now – it's a real option. Amen.