

B Advent 1 12.3.23

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

Focus Statement: No matter what is going on, Christ still comes to us.

I was listening to an interview last week with a man living in Gaza. The interview was a few weeks old, so it was before the current ceasefire. The building down the street from him was being evacuated due to air strikes, and he was standing on his balcony, all the windows and doors open to protect them blasting out under the pressure of the strikes, watching his neighbors flee. Through the audio recording, you could hear explosions in the background. “Do you need to evacuate?” The reporter asked him. “Where would I go?” He replied, “all the borders are closed, I have nowhere to go.” They continued their conversation, when suddenly a new sound cut through the recording, the warm, deep tone of the Muslim call to prayer. “Do you need to go pray?” The reporter asked him. “I will pray,” he said, “I will pray after we finish this call.” “What do you pray for?” “It’s a kind of a spiritual connection between us and God. And actually, that’s the only thing that helps us at this moment, as we are left. I believe that the people of Gaza are left alone. I’ll pray for my people to get what they want, to live in peace, because we deserve peace.”

I heard these words, and I thought of the cry in our first reading from Isaiah, that God would “tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil.” Isaiah’s pleas for God’s intervention come from a people in crisis. Earlier in Isaiah, Israel was conquered by the Babylonians and its people forced into exile. Now, scattered across a foreign empire, they plead for God to remember that they are God’s people, to not leave them isolated and alone, to find them, bring them home, and save them. This verse from

Isaiah moves me, because it is such a universal cry. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” is certainly the plea of the people of Gaza, the Ukraine, and many other war torn regions across the globe. But I hear it in other places as well. I’ve cried it myself, as I’m sure all of you have at one time or another as well. It rings out in all places of oppression and suffering. In places of poverty and economic injustice. In the face of racism, prejudice, and xenophobia. In hospitals and doctors offices, when we or people we love suffer. In places of abuse, addiction, broken homes, and broken relationships. O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, O God. O that you would come to save us.

If this seems like a bit of a dark intro to the first Sunday having the Christmas tree up, welcome to Advent, the most countercultural of the religious holidays. While the rest of the world is Jingle Bells and Christmas lights and already a little tired of Mariah Carey, we in the liturgical traditions are reading texts about the destruction of the world. The first Sunday of Advent is always the most jarring, as not only do we have this Isaiah text we’ve already talked about, we also come into Mark’s Gospel right where we left off in Matthew before Christ the King, in Jesus’ final address to his disciples before the beginning of the passion. We didn’t pay as much attention to them this year, because we were working through the Old Testament, but Jesus’ teachings in the days leading up to the start of his crucifixion were direct and forceful. A lot about judgment and watchfulness and being alert to what is coming. And if Isaiah was pleading for God to come down and shake the mountains, Jesus in Mark is all, keep awake, because it’s coming. “In those days, after the 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 of heaven will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.”

And that, dear people of God, is the good news of this text, and the good news of Advent. Because, here's what was happening in Mark's community when the writer of Mark's Gospel first gathered these words for them. Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels, written around 66 to 70 CE. If you remember previous history lessons I've given you in sermons, this was the time of the First Jewish Roman War. After three years of war, General Titus started the siege of Jerusalem in 70. Following a brutal seven month siege, during which the entire city's food supply was destroyed, Jerusalem's defenses fell and the city was destroyed in a battle so violent that the ancient historian Josephus described the streets running with rivers of blood. By the end of the war, at least a third of the Jewish population of Judea were dead, including ninety percent of the population of Jerusalem. The Temple was destroyed and with it entire social classes of religious and political leadership. This is the audience to whom Mark was writing, a people shell-shocked by the entire destruction of everything and everyone they'd ever known. The life and safety they thought they knew was gone, never to be seen again. So when Mark brought these words of Jesus back to them, this claim that after the days of suffering, they would see the Son of Man coming, those words weren't heard as the threat we often hear them in, they were heard as promise. This was a people who had seen the sun darkened and the moon not give its light. They were well aware of what it felt like when the stars fell around you and the powers of the heavens were shaken. This text, and the way it calls back to previous Old Testament texts, reminded Mark's audience that, like the fig tree putting forth its leaves and they know that

summer is near, the world has cycles. We see the leaves fall on our trees, and we know the trees are not dead. It's a sign of the approaching winter, it will get cold and dark, but in a few months, the buds will emerge, the days will get longer, and summer will return. This text is Jesus' bold declaration that no matter what trials and tribulations befall us, God is still here. We do not know the day or the hour when all will be revealed, but we do not have to fear no matter what happens, because this text calls out to us God's continued presence and promised triumph.

And that, dear people, is the beautiful, powerful, declaration of Advent. That God is with us when stuff is hard. So much about the month of December, about commercial Christmas, can be fake cheer and hiding pain behind lights and parties. But Advent is honest. Advent looks us right in the face and says, no matter what you are struggling with, God is here. When we cry out, O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, Advent declares to us that God already has. We can't always see it or feel it, there is, as Jesus was telling his disciples in the days leading up to his crucifixion, a lot of life left to live between Christ has come and Christ will come again. But because of what Jesus has already done, our salvation is not based on our feelings, or the world around us, or whatever we are enduring, it is based on the promise of God's continued presence.

So wherever you find yourself this Advent season, know that God is with you in that. Maybe this is an awesome December for you. Fantastic, you can carry the joy for others. But if it's not going so hot. If you're struggling with the state of the world, or the state of your own life or health or family, know that Advent is a season where it is ok to be honest. To sit in

the complicated, resting in the promise that we don't know the day or the hour, but we know how the story ends, with a God who is always triumphantly on our side. No matter what. Amen.