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Isaiah 64: 1 – 9
1 Corinthians 1: 3 – 9

Ps. 80: 1 – 7, 16 – 18
Mark 13: 24 – 37

“Advent is a time of exquisite balance between the sadness of the mess we live in, and the bliss of the world we would like to live in.” So wrote author Margaret Hebblethwaite. [*Opening the Scriptures: Faith through the Year*, p. 49] And in Advent, time does indeed hang in the balance. Welcome to Advent, that season of the church year which is so antithetical to the world around us and, therefore, such a badly needed – and under appreciated – corrective. Advent is that season beginning four Sundays before Christmas when we wait and watch expectantly for the coming of Christ. Not so much for the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, but for the Savior who comes to redeem the world, this mess that we live in, this mess that we have created. Advent is like that moment when, having struck a match, we wait with great hope for a flame, a Light, to appear.

The word “Advent” comes from the Latin *advenio*, meaning to come, and so we find ourselves saying, “Come, Lord Jesus!” with a fervency that we don’t often have. This is the time of preparing, of hoping, of anticipating, of watching for God’s Advent in Christ, of Christ coming in power and great glory.

“Keep awake!” are Jesus’ last words in today’s passage from the Gospel of Mark. A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned that for the evangelist, Matthew, “Keep awake!” doesn’t mean sitting still and simply biding our time, like a hunter waiting for a deer to appear. For Matthew, “Keep awake!” means to be on the alert, but to be active and about the work that God has given us to do – feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, clothing the naked. Now, in a new Church year, we hear “Keep awake!” from the Gospel of Mark.

For Mark, the waiting and watchfulness of Advent are perhaps more about slowing down enough for our spirits to catch up with us. For Mark, “Keep awake!” is about being present to the moment, enough to realize that all our frenetic activity might simply be a cover for the loneliness, emptiness, or an unanswered quest for purpose, perhaps, that lies just below the surface. For Mark, “Keep awake!” is about being vigilant for God’s activity in the world, trusting that God has acted, is acting, and ultimately will act decisively in the course of human history. That is the first step in Advent – the discovery, through watching and waiting, of just how much we need God to come into our world. So, Advent is about being expectant, pregnant with hope, knowing that, in the fullness of time, God will deliver the world. “If there were no Advent,” writes John Taylor, “we would need to invent it. We human creatures, in spite of all that has happened to us and been done to us, are still hopeful. Something new, something vital, something promising is always coming and we are always expecting.”

“In the fullness of time” is an interesting expression because it doesn’t relate to chronological time – time marked by a clock or a calendar – but rather to God’s sense of time, to the appropriate time, *καιρῶς*. When the time is ripe. And any idea of when that fullness of time will come to pass is not discernible for us mere humans. But we can keep awake and be alert for the signs of God acting. Simone Weil, a Jewish writer, wrote, “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.” We are a people, a culture, who are not much good at waiting patiently, which is one of the reasons why this season of Advent is so counter-cultural to our modern, instant-gratification, chaotic, frenzied, 24/7 world. But our call from Jesus is to be ready, to put on the armor of light, and to stand

confidently (*con-fide* – with faith, trust) in the presence of God and with one another. This is what enables us to survive spiritually in such a crazy world.

Perhaps because Advent is a season when time hangs in the balance, it is also a season of looking both forward and backward. Advent, as one writer has said, reminds us that the perfection for which we long, the fulfillment that we seek, the destination toward which we are headed is ultimately not to be found in this world. Advent is the exquisite balance between the sadness of the mess we live in and the bliss of the world we so deeply desire to live in.

Twentieth century German theologian and principle architect of Vatican II, Karl Rahner, wrote that Advent is not merely looking back to something past, but is our entrance by faith, hope and love into the process which began when God entered the history of the world and made it God's own. And because of that, Rahner said, history is inexorably moving towards the day which is prophetically put before us in today's Gospel. From that picture of fulfillment which Jesus gives us, we are to understand what is happening in the depth of our life and our reality, albeit unobtrusively and quietly, and therefore in a way that, in our sinful blindness, may escape our radar. Remember last week's Gospel about the hiddenness of the Kingdom of God? God has already begun the process of redemption. God is already here, hidden, and, as Rahner adds, the revelation of God's being is at hand.

The things of which Jesus speaks prophetically in today's Gospel are frightening. In a day and age when tsunamis, category 5 hurricanes, devastating fires and earthquakes are becoming increasingly common, not to mention the threat of nuclear war, the images seem all too real and possible. But Anglican Bishop N. T. Wright tells us that the language of a dark sun, a quenched moon, and stars falling from the sky is *not* a prediction of the 'end of the world' for Jesus' listeners. Otherwise, what would be the point of running somewhere else? Rather, Jesus is trying to convey to his disciples that it will soon be the end of the world as they know it. Jesus is speaking about the end of a way of life that has failed to obey God's call to be a light to the world. Likewise, Jesus' reference to the 'Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory,' taken from Daniel 7, isn't about Jesus' return to earth, Wright says, but about his coming *to* God. It is about Jesus' vindication and triumph through suffering, as well as about judgment on the failures of God's people. Forty years after Jesus' death, his words about the fall of the Temple and the end of life as the Israelites know it will come true in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. We need to hear Mark's words in this context, as Mark is writing sometime around this destruction. But that doesn't mean Jesus isn't speaking to us as well.

Advent is a season, a time for us as Christians, to seek God within the bounds of our souls, all the while living outwardly in the midst of all the chaos and tragedy and beauty of this world. Advent is about God deigning to pitch a tent and dwell among us. And we are consciously capable of perceiving that presence and responding to it.

So, for us, despite the dire-sounding words of the Gospel, Advent is not about escaping, but rather acting within the neediness of the present, all the while with our eyes, our hearts on a fulfilled future. Just because the world is other than it should be does not alter the truth that Christ is present in it already. The Christ for whom we wait is the very same Christ who, even now, is among us and in us and working through us to bring about the redemption of this world. And it is precisely because we *expect* this redemption, this deliverance, this consummation of the cosmos that we can live with hope in the midst of our messy world. As one writer puts it, what is uncertain is not the 'coming' of Christ – that's a given – but our own response, our own reception, our own readiness and capacity to 'go forth to meet' the Christ.

Frederick Buechner writes that all of the paradoxical themes of Advent are woven into the words that form our Collect for today:

“Give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility: that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal.”

Jesus comes at Christmas in great humility, but the promise is Christ coming at the end of time in power and great glory. Jesus coming as a child to save us and Christ coming as both judge and king. Mortal life and immortal life. “They clatter against each other like shutters in the wind with all their points and counterpoints,” Buechner writes. “They all but deafen us with their message at one and the same time of sin and grace, justice and mercy, comfort and challenge.” He goes on to say that the two phrases, “Cast away the works of darkness” and “put on the armor of light” are what best sum up who and where we are. Somewhere between the darkness and the light. Somewhere between the sadness of the mess we live in and the bliss of the world we would like to live in. Not just at Advent, but in all seasons and times. And we watch and we wait, as Buechner says, for a holiness to heal us and to hallow us, to liberate us from the darkness. So watch. And wait. Because the Light is coming. +