

For those of you who were hoping for a nice, cozy, and comfortable entrance into Advent, let me apologize right now. Our texts this morning are anything but comfortable. They are unsettling. If we're listening, we should be both excited and horrified by these prophecies. We heard in the Isaiah passage this morning, as the first first Advent candle was lit, "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" Isaiah prays that God will leave the heavens and bring God's very presence to earth. As the heavens torn were apart as God descended, the very mountains would quake and the nations would tremble.

Christians have the somewhat regrettable habit of pulling Isaiah out for the holidays—much like we dig the Christmas decorations out of the attic. We read Isaiah like he's a fortune teller or Nostradamus, making predictions about Jesus. But we should fight that tendency. Because Isaiah wasn't writing about Jesus, per se. He was passing on the messages he received from God, intended to provide specific comfort to specific people in the midst of a specific crisis. These people are in exile. The Temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed. The very home of God has been destroyed. He wasn't writing to predict the future. He was writing to give courage to his people so they could endure.

How do you hear Isaiah's words when that is your reality? Because you're little Israel. You don't have military might. And you are beginning to wonder if your God has also been defeated—where's God when he's not in the temple? "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at YOUR presence---to make YOUR name known to your adversaries so that the nations might tremble at your presence!!"

I invite you this week to spend some time with Isaiah. To listen to his words in their own context. To let them speak to you in your context. What is going on in your life where heaven being torn apart and mountains quaking would be a sign of hope?

We, I think, have a hard time reading Isaiah without immediately thinking of Jesus. Because while we are preparing for Jesus' birth in 4 weeks, we know what happened 2000 years ago. God did tear open the heavens. And good, observant Jews, who had been hearing Isaiah's prophecies all of their lives, recognized a connection between Jesus and the words of Isaiah. The gospel accounts of Jesus were written down by people who often framed their understanding of who Jesus was through the lens of Isaiah's writing.

In the first chapter of Mark, as Jesus is being baptized by John in the Jordan River, we are told that the heavens were torn apart and God's spirit descended like a dove onto Jesus. The NRSV cleans up the Greek a little bit. A more literal translation of that section would read something like, "the heavens were shredded apart and the Spirit of God dive bombed Jesus like a pigeon." Because Mark knows what Isaiah suggests—once God leaves heaven and comes to earth, things will never be the same. You shouldn't imagine the curtains of heaven parting neatly, ready to close again. This curtain is demolished.

It should give us pause—you want God to come down? Really? Because once it happens, you can't go back to business as usual. "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" And once the curtain is hanging there in shreds, you can't just send God back up there on your terms and then yell out "Curtain!"

So God did come down. God heard the cries of God's people and changed the way we relate to the Divine. A baby was born in Bethlehem. In a manger. Away from the halls of

power and privilege. And the world was turned upside down by this man, fully human, fully divine.

But none of that “God coming down to earth” business turned out as expected either. By the time Mark and the other Gospels are being written down, the Temple—which had been rebuilt since the time of Isaiah—is laying in ruins again. Jesus predicts that earlier in this chapter of Mark. “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another. All will be thrown down!”

But he doesn’t leave people with destruction. There is more to come. And they are to prepare for it. “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.”

Once the Divine enters the world, even the heavens themselves will be shaken. By making reference to sun, moon, and stars, Mark is cluing us in to the truth that God’s reign is a cosmic reign, it isn’t just a change of administration. As different—for good or bad— as we think the Obama administration might be from the Bush administration, for instance, that’s not a fitting metaphor for the Kingdom of Heaven. It isn’t just new people taking over. It is an entirely new creation.

So, all of those systems on earth that enslave people? They’ll be gone.

Cancer? Gone.

War? Gone.

Credit card debt and second mortgages? Gone.

Child abuse? Gone.

Genocide? Gone.

Terrorism? Gone.

Poverty? Gone.

That is an unrecognizable world for us. Stars falling from heaven. Sun darkened.

Then the Son of Man will send his angels to gather his elect from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

This language from Mark and Isaiah is difficult for us. But for their original audience, it would have been comforting. Because they would have recognized it as apocalyptic literature. Whatever notions you have about the word “apocalypse”, try to let them go. The authors of “Left Behind”, while they may have written compelling fiction, have done a disservice to a scriptural understanding about apocalypse. Apocalypse is not about getting your individual self right with Jesus so that when he comes back in glory, you’ll be on the right side and will be able to watch the fools who didn’t choose Jesus suffer torments for their sins.

Apocalypse is a Greek word that means, “Revelation”. Apocalyptic books in the Bible are rare—Daniel and Revelation are the only full apocalyptic books we have. But Apocalyptic was a common genre in the biblical world. And Apocalyptic themes run through books—the texts we have this morning are good examples. The Apostle Paul’s writings speak of “revelation” a fair amount too.

What Apocalyptic literature reminds its hearers, or reveals to its hearers, is that until the end, when God wipes away every tear from our eyes, our redemption is not complete. It is not finished as long as **anyone** on earth is in pain. Our freedom is restricted as long as people are in bondage and suffering. Our longing is not for just ourselves but for everyone. You can hear that in Mark’s revelation here in chapter 13. “Then the Son of Man (language from Daniel) will send his angels to gather his elect from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

There is no place, no suffering, so far away that God will not be able to find you to gather you up.

So, as we enter Advent, we begin it with an Apocalypse, with a Revelation, that a change is coming. And we are told to wait for it. To watch for it. But we are also told, very clearly, that the prediction business is not ours. “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father....” So our waiting and preparing doesn’t involve guessing which horrible events in our world are the sign that Christ’s return is imminent. We are told, simply, to “Keep Awake!”

In the coming weeks, as we light the candles and prepare for Christ’s return and for Christ’s birth, I invite you to consider the community nature of these texts. Whether it is Isaiah’s reminder that we are the clay and God is the potter and we are ALL the works of God’s hand or whether it is Mark’s reminder that God’s angels will leave no corner of the world untouched as they gather God’s elect—these texts, and many others, remind us that God’s Kingdom is Good News for **all of creation**. So, as we “Keep Awake!”, let us do so for all of God’s children. Whether we’re getting hats and gloves for kids at the school next door or supporting orphanages in Uganda, Christ’s arrival brings hope for all, not just for a few. We “keep awake”, not by sitting there, looking up at the sky, waiting for his return, but by making a difference in the world.

That is why we’re going to meet the neighbors next week and why we invite our friends to join us at church. Not because our church will be better if it is bigger, but because we have this GOOD NEWS to share. Isaiah wondered what it would be like if the heavens were torn open and God came down to earth. Isaiah’s wondering became our Good News. In the birth of a baby, God revealed Godself to us in ways we had never seen before. And it is for that baby that we now watch. It is for Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, that we actively wait. Welcome to Advent, friends! Let the waiting begin!