

Sermon – “Awesome Deeds We Did Not Expect”
Sunday, November 29, 2020 (First Sunday of Advent)
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37
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Our first reading from scripture today brings us words from the prophet Isaiah, longing for the presence of God to appear, and hoping and trusting that it could bring salvation. Hear now these words from Isaiah 64, verses 1 through 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 forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

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Our second reading, from the Gospel of Mark, comes from within the midst of a surprisingly long and apocalyptic conversation that Jesus shares with the disciples after one of them comments on the greatness of the temple building. He tells them of some very worrisome things to come, and then concludes with this passage, from 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. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven 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. ³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It 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.

³⁵ Therefore, 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, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

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Advent is here. And so we wait.

We are always waiting, really, are we not?

Sometimes we distract ourselves for a while, or find a brief sense of contentedness, but there’s still a seeking for something, hoping for something, waiting for *something* that always, eventually comes back.

There’s a song on an old record my parents used to play by a folk singer named Bob Franke, a song whose refrain goes like this:

There’s a hole in the middle of the prettiest life,
So the lawyers and the prophets say.
And not your father nor your mother nor your lover’s
Gonna ever make it go away.

And there’s too much darkness in an endless night
To be afraid of the way we feel.
Let’s be kind to each other,
Not forever but for real.¹

The scripture for the first Sunday in Advent never lets us forget we are waiting for something. In all three years of the Revised Common Lectionary, Advent begins with apocalyptic texts and the admonition to be on our guard for, well, for the *entire* order of things to be overturned. Sometimes these texts seem jarring, when we are in one of our contented moments, but maybe this year it seems slightly less alien than if often does to be told that things will not always carry on as usual.

¹ Bob Franke, “For Real,” first released in 1983 on an album of the same name by Flying Fish Records. A version is available on the still in-print album *The Other Evening In Chicago* (2005, Waterbug), and the song has also been covered and recorded by David Wilcox, Lui Collins, and others.

We've seen plague, still spreading and growing. We've seen unrest, which has lowered to a simmer but remains present just under the surface. We have seen powerful leaders openly toying with the idea of refusing to continue the American project, suggesting in advance that the outcome of our democratic voting process might not be honored. And most disturbing has been the unsettling feeling that each one of these things as we face it today is possibly only the mild prelude to the big event, the tip, maybe, of an iceberg the rest of which we haven't even seen yet.

Maybe the year of our Lord 2020 has been the sort where we start to feel more connected than usual to texts like our first reading, from Isaiah, which worry at the Lord's seeming absence and call for the presence of God to be made known, in an earth-shattering way, calling to mind the former times, tales of a God who "did awesome deeds we did not expect,"² and looking for such a God to appear on the scene, shaking everything up and setting it aright, hoping for that day—and also praying that we will survive it, our transgressions forgiven and our identity remembered as people created by God's own hand.

The coming of Jesus Christ, whose incarnation and resurrection was the greatest of awesome deeds we did not expect, and whose promise was indeed one of our own rescue and restoration, was what Isaiah waited for so long ago, and is what we await, still and again, today. Our Advent season is not just remembrance but our own hope and vigilance, too.

A few days ago, I stumbled across an online group devoted to karaoke in a time of pandemic. It was a kind of open forum, a community of strangers, in which people are encouraged simply to post videos of themselves singing songs for others to see and enjoy. I spent a couple of hours just scrolling through and watching people from every walk of life, all separated from others by this moment of COVID isolation, reaching out with some small bit of musical art, produced in amateur circumstances with home computers and cell phones and transmitted from their quarantine islands, each like a message in a bottle, tossed upon the currents of the Internet in the hopes that someone would see it, hear it, and share with them in that momentary exercise of the creative human spirit.

I saw fantastic singers and instrumentalists who I imagined were professional musicians sidelined from their regular work. I saw everyday people for whom music, the language of the soul, was the language they desperately needed to speak right now. I saw folks whose singing was no polish and all heart, and I saw people whose talent was this very type of thing. The child with surprising voice control, the man with rough pitch who declared he had turned to singing every day instead of drinking and had just marked a year sober, the elderly man in fancy cowboy boots and a big hat to match, bringing back the Country & Western hits of decades past.

I couldn't resist watching this mish-mash of wildly different generations and genres, abilities and moods, and I stayed up a lot later than I meant to that night, absorbing this collective expression of some shared need for the things we have lost in all the social distance, echoing all the more powerfully for sitting atop the universal human longings that are never absent in this fallen world. There was something compelling about seeing a kind of communal separation, solo voices jointly lifted up as we all wait, and hope, and look to another day, one in which the world will have changed.

² From Isaiah 64:3 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

That old Bob Franke song, whose title is “For Real,” ends with this verse:

Some say God is a lover;
Some say it’s an endless void.
Some say both, and some say she’s angry,
And some say he’s just annoyed.

But if God felt a hammer in the palm of his hand,
Then God knows the way we feel,
And love lasts forever,
Forever and for real.

2020 perhaps has jolted us awake. It has thrown us certainly off our stride, and for some of us has seen tragic loss. But our Lord was a carpenter, and *has* felt a hammer in the palm of his hand, and does know the way we feel, and I think Bob Franke is right that this means love, after all, is forever *and* for real.

The first time it was quiet, in the nighttime, in a stable, though announced by ancient prophets still a surprise, a baby born to a humble couple far from the halls of power. This is our joy, and our gift, the cry of the newborn infant breaking into the silent night, God-with-us, hidden no more, distanced from us no more.

The second time it is loud and thundering, “the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory,”³ again announced from times of old but still a surprise which comes suddenly to us, for which we are told to wait, and watch.

Let us keep awake together, then. Let us stay awake by feeding our neighbors and bringing about whatever justice is in our hands to deliver. Let us remember the poor and the lost, and remember one another, and forget the trivial, the meaningless, and all the other things which lull us to sleep. May the Spirit of God move among us, and charge us up, and give us light and wisdom, empathy, and the faith and assurance to wait, in hopeful patience, for the advent of the kingdom in which love lasts forever, for real, and where we never have to sing it alone. Amen.

³ From Mark 13:26 (*NRSV*), using language clearly connecting back to the prophetic vision described in Daniel chapter 7.