

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you 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—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
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.
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.
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.
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.
Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13:24-37

‘But 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.
Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. 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.
‘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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 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. 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

GOD IN THE PEOPLE

“Keep Awake,” Jesus says to his disciples. I can think many a Sunday worship service where keeping awake was a real challenge, especially as a child. I’m always amused to see what our children do to keep from getting too bored during the first twenty minutes of worship service; they leave me lots of artwork on the offering envelopes in the pews. I appreciate it because it’s exactly what I did as a child sitting in the pews for the entire worship service which seemed like *forever!* They say that what goes around comes around.

“Keep awake,” Jesus told us nearly 2000 years ago, telling us all the scary things that will be going on when “the Son of Man” comes – we have assumed that the Son of Man is Jesus himself returning in a splendid fashion. We have also assumed that the events Jesus is describing have not yet transpired; we haven’t seen the sun and moon darkened or the stars falling out of the sky, nor have we seen this Son of Man riding in on the clouds or the angels gathering the “elect” from around the world. Periodically groups show up believing themselves to be “the elect,” groups who expect the stars to start falling any minute, but so far they haven’t and those groups are dismissed as lunatics. Jesus seems to have set them up for failure by saying, “This generation will not pass until these things have taken place.” The early church *did* expect those things to take place in their generation, but a hundred generations have passed since Jesus spoke those words and regardless of how much smoke we see on the horizon it seems that another generation will pass before these things transpire.

It seems to many that Jesus miscalculated or his understanding of a generation was different from anyone else’s, but however you add it up, it seems clear that we have grown tired of waiting. The season of Advent is supposed to be about preparing ourselves for Christ’s Second Coming, but it has morphed into the season of Christmas where we rehash the story of events leading up to Jesus’ birth, and I completely understand why this has happened; how many years have we been “staying awake” for Jesus to come back? I like the Jewish tradition of always sending someone to the door to allow Elijah to enter, even though he has yet to show up. I respect the way they adhere to tradition and faith. Perhaps our Jewish friends have the same degree of skepticism as many Christians regarding the arrival of Elijah; maybe they’ve stopped expecting him to show up as many Christians have stopped expecting Jesus’ return.

And this may not be such a bad thing. Because maybe we haven’t come to fully appreciate Jesus’ *first* coming over 2000 years ago, this thing called the *Incarnation*, God taking on human flesh. In fact Jesus may be urging us to take a more serious look at his incarnation in today’s Gospel lesson. That verse that throws so many of us for a loop is, “This generation will not pass away until these things have taken place.” We have assumed that they haven’t taken place yet, *but what if they have?* Notice the order of the time references that Jesus uses in his little parable about the master returning home; it may be evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or at dawn. Mark uses the same time references in telling the events leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion:

- The last supper occurs in the evening
- His arrest in the garden occurs in the middle of the night
- It is at cockcrow that Peter denies that he knows Jesus
- And it is at dawn that Jesus is handed over to Pilate to be crucified.

What’s more, Mark says that darkness fell over the whole land during that last three hours of Jesus’ crucifixion. Matthew describes an earthquake, and it was at the moment of his death that a Roman centurion declares, “Truly this man was God’s son.” Here was a man, flesh and blood, pouring his love out on a cross. Jesus’ first Advent was as a vulnerable peasant child born in a hostile environment, and why? So that the world could see what that centurion saw; a man so dedicated to the will of God that he would empty himself for all of humanity. Jesus, both man and God, living, struggling, suffering and dying among us. Is it not a thrilling experience to experience Jesus’ coming to us in this manner? Is it any less thrilling than having him

come to us clouds, in great power and glory? Isn't the incarnation itself evidence of God's power and glory? In this sense, Jesus was right; that generation did not pass before those things took place – the sky darkening, the earth shaking, and at least some people seeing Jesus in his **true** power and glory.

I wonder how many people today have come to know Jesus the way this centurion came to know him? Perhaps it's not a bad thing to focus on the baby Jesus and the days leading up to his birth. Perhaps it will help us to see God at work in the common things around us, things like vulnerable babies, teenage mothers, simple carpenters, the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, and those who suffer.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us today that, whatever bad things may go on in this world, even the bad things that we ourselves may be guilty of, God is at work in us. We're the clay, and he is the potter, and that is a very comforting thought. God working in us and through us so that we can see his presence in ourselves and in others. We can see that God is indeed with us always. Emmanuel. May God open our eyes that we may see him in the commonplace. Amen.