

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

“Hope”

Introduction

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence, and nations would tremble.” That is the prophet Isaiah praying to God on behalf of the people of Israel.

“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.” That is Jesus sharing an apocalyptic message with his disciples.

And with these foreboding words we begin the season of Advent, a season of hope. Hope? With these words?

Advent comes from a Latin word meaning “coming,” or “arrival.” It is the period leading up to Christmas when we prepare for the arrival of Christ, not Christmas, but Christ, the coming of Christ anew into our lives.

But William Carl says he thinks that for some, Ad-vent means you add up all your frustrated, hopeless feelings and then vent them on somebody else. I pray that Advent will be more than that for you.

This is a season of intense feelings. Whatever you feel, you feel more intensely this time of year. If you are happy, you feel very happy. But if you are sad, if you are sick, if you have experienced loss, and if you are low on hope, this can be a terrible time of year.

So how are you feeling? Are you humming the tunes, excited by the activity? Or are you dreading this month? Wondering if you have the strength to get through it?

I

You would never know it now, but the celebration of Christmas had a tremendous challenge establishing a foothold in this country. Zealous Protestants made up eighty percent of the population of colonial America. They were refugees from the life and death struggles of the Old World’s religious wars, and they wanted to discard anything that had to do with the Roman Church. One of the orthodoxies they threw out in the reforms was Christ Mass, the setting aside of December 25th for a celebration of Christ’s birth. Protestants said that the date of 12/25 was not biblically-based, and we had no business celebrating it.

Historians write that in the religious groups of the mid-Atlantic colonies, one of the most numerous sects was the “*Christmas-disdaining Presbyterians.*” In fact, even 200 years after the first colonies, many still did not celebrate Christmas. In 1867, the Rev. Henry Harbaugh, a minister who believed in the celebration of Christmas wrote:

“Here where I am living, in the western Pennsylvania hills, they want to hear nothing of Christmas. They spend the day working as on any other day. Their children

grow up knowing nothing of brightly lit Christmas trees, nor Christmas presents. God have mercy on these Presbyterians, these pagans.

So maybe those mixed feelings you are having about this season are not just personal emotions. Maybe it is the Presbyterian in you. A lot has happened in the 150 years since Rev. Harbaugh wrote that. Even we stoic Presbyterians now celebrate Christmas.

But as we come to this first Sunday in Advent, we find ourselves wondering if and how we want to approach this season of preparation. Three weeks from this evening will be Christmas Eve. Just how much can you do in three weeks?

II

Both the people for whom Isaiah was praying in our first lesson and the people to whom Jesus was speaking in our second lesson were low on hope. They lived in different eras with different captors, but both had suffered years of oppression and anguish. And they had given up hope. They thought God had abandoned them.

There is a fancy theological term called *Deus absconditus*. That is Latin for “hidden God.” That is, God has absconded, jumped ship, slipped out the back door. God has left the building.

That is how we feel sometimes in this scary world in which we live. Who has not prayed sometime and wondered if you were just talking to yourself? Who has not stood with a loved one in pain or anguish and prayed for God’s help and wondered are these prayers transmitting, or are they just bouncing off the ceiling? Who has ever looked up and thought, “God, could you just tear open the heavens and come down”?

I wish I could tell that God’s presence with us is something that can always be seen or felt, clear as day, God standing beside us. But in my encounters, that is not the way it is with the living God.

Sometimes there is the blinding flash of light, the unmistakable voice from above, but most often God speaks through whispers, not shouts. And God is found in the shadows, not bright lights. And sometimes the whispers are very low whispers, and sometimes the shadows are very dim. (Adapted from Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and the New York Times*, pp, 25-26.)

III

Isaiah does not know the precise time and form in which his lament will be answered, but he knows God will come. Jesus says no one knows the precise details, the day and the hour, but he promises God is coming. But watch, Jesus says, because it may not be as you expect.

There is a 16th century painting by Flemish Renaissance artist Peter Brueghel called “Numbering at Bethlehem.” It is a December scene in a village, actually not Bethlehem, but a Flemish village. It depicts an ordinary winter day in the life of a little town. In the foreground a butcher is preparing a pig for the market. A woodman is

struggling with a load of firewood. Children are cavorting around a frozen pond, some are sledding, some are skating. A young man is making an obvious pass at a maiden who is obviously uninterested. It is a picture of an ordinary, mundane winter day with nothing save a wreath over a window to suggest anything extraordinary, anything beyond the expected.

Yet if you look more closely at the scene, down toward the bottom of the canvas, you see moving toward the census takers at the inn, an inconspicuous, thoroughly ordinary young woman on a donkey led by a stoop-shouldered bearded peasant carrying a saw under his arm. It is Mary, with Joseph the carpenter, come to town to be counted. They could easily be overlooked in the midst of the ordinariness.

Conclusion

The artist understood Immanuel, God with us. With us and yet unnoticed as we go about the routines of our lives. We work, we eat, we shop, we register with our government, we pay our taxes, we take care of our business. Meanwhile God is slipping quietly across the canvases of our busy lives, unexpected, unheralded, unnoticed. The One for whom we are praying and hoping comes, but everything else in the picture blinds us to the Presence.

That is why Jesus says, “Keep alert. Keep awake. Watch. Listen.”

Advent begins with foreboding words in a world that seems hopeless, like this tree, bear of any signs or symbols of God’s presence.

But Advent comes with a promise: God is going to rip open the heavens and come into your life. It will probably not be with trumpet blast or seismic tremors. Perhaps it will come in a gesture, a whisper, or a shadow moving in the darkness. Perhaps in quiet moments, or in music, or the telling of the story, or the visual of lights, or perhaps through being with individuals, or through memories of individuals, God is going to come into your life, and there will be hope. Keep alert, watch, listen. Amen.