

Advent One B Isaiah 64:1-9, I Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

*“Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light...”*

This collect for the Advent Sunday begins with abrupt and urgent entreaty. Rude as a wakening alarm, we plead for God to give us the needed grace to move from darkness to light.

If Advent prepares us for some fresh coming of Christ -- at this year's Christmas or in that larger, brighter future that illumines our present days -- then it is a time to acknowledge more deeply the ways that we need God's anointed to come...and what that waiting is like.

Lighting our candles, we see ourselves again as dwelling in darkness. Despite all the lights and noise of Christmas commerce, the world is cold and in need. God is not here. Not yet fully, not enough...not nearly enough!

We are fully occupied with the darkness at Penn State, the gloom of the European Union, the pepper spray at the U of CA and in the madness of Black Friday, The warring foolishness of nations, the monstrous actions of Assad of Syria, any much more.

During Advent, God calls out the big guns to get our attention. Isaiah prays, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence!"

If only the heavens would open wide and we would see God's overriding majesty, God's justice and grace revealed to us and to this entire sorry world.

If only the firmament were rent and goodness poured down into the midst of our lives. If only all that is wrong with this world could be burned away and God's people restored.

And what better, if unwelcome, wake-up call than Isaiah proclaiming that "we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth." Just what we want to hear on a Sunday morning, as part of the good news -- thanks be to God -- that is proclaimed and pondered in church.

The prophets provide cold clarity about what it means to be God's people, and what our responsibilities are to each other and to God, and to God's world.

How remarkable that God refuses to give up on us. How amazing that even after we have had tears "in full measure," this is the God to whom we pray: "Come, save us." This is the God who has promised to come to us.

How often in extremity have we prayed with Isaiah, "Give us life, that we may call upon your name," and with that prayer making an implicit promise to use our lives to better purpose next time...to resist the temptations to sloth, anger, pride, greed, malice and everything else that would deflect us and diminish our better selves.

Kathleen Norris writes that she saw this prayer crudely but effectively expressed in a bumper sticker on a beat-up car in Williston, North Dakota: "O Lord, Give Us Just One More Oil Boom. We Promise Not to Piss It Away This Time."

We're not laughing at you, God, but *with* you; and maybe weeping a little, too.

It was Stanley Hauerwas who somewhere wrote that Christians have forgotten how to beg. That's the price we've paid for our sense of privilege that expects everything here and now. But you couldn't say that about Isaiah the prophet or the psalmist. They definitely knew how to beg.

The greatest debacle for Jews in the Old Testament was why God had given them over to

their pagan enemies Assyria (722 BC) and Babylon (586 BC) who vanquished them. "Our holy and glorious temple," Isaiah cries, "has been burned with fire, and all that we treasure lies in ruin" (Isaiah 64:11).

How long must Israel wait for God's mighty acts of deliverance? The psalmist begs God to save His people, and complains that God has made them "drink tears by the bowlful".

Isaiah's elegant poetry wistfully recalls the long gone days when God had wielded his "glorious arm of power" and Moses had led the exodus from Egypt that humiliated Pharaoh. But in his own day Isaiah could only wonder, "where are your zeal and your might? We all shrivel up like a leaf. ...You hide your face from us" (Isaiah 63:15, 64:6, 7).

The lesson from 1 Corinthians provides a contrast to Isaiah, as Paul also addresses what it means to be God's people, specifically those who are members of the household of God.

Paul assures us that God has already given us the strength we need to bear whatever comes our way in life. I certainly need that when I listen to today's gospel, which is the sort of Bible passage that is often used as a bludgeon to terrify people into believing in a God who, as Roberta Bondi once put it, loves you so much he's going to get you if you don't watch out!

Isaiah prays, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence!"

But the heavens do not open. Not that way. Beneath the firmament, history continues to play out its recurring ancient tragedies. We ourselves recall the images of the sky's lovely ceiling changing into blinding horror and then descending in choking clouds of radioactive fire and dust.

We quake at the thought of it happening once again.

Even when gazing into a starlit night we see no heaven revealed on the other side. The stars are not benignly glittering angels. The firmament is not a thin shell but goes on and on into infinite wastes and countless indifferent galaxies. Even in their clarity, the heavens are as opaque as those over Golgotha, where Jesus could no longer find the God to whom he prayed.

We discover that God is not our Cosmic Concierge. Human experience belies the delusion and pious happy talk, so deeply embedded in the American sense of entitlement, that the Gospel solves every problem and answers every question. Rather, God offers us a way to live without answers to questions and with problems that don't disappear.

Advent reminds us that sometimes we must wait, and that God acts in God's own time, in God's own ways, and for God's own reasons.

After twenty years as a professor at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard, the Catholic priest Henri Nouwen moved to a home in Toronto for the severely handicapped called Daybreak. The temptation of Jesus to turn stones into bread, Nouwen suggests, is the temptation to be "relevant," that is, to do something concrete about the world's suffering.

He writes: "Oh, how often I have wished I could do that! Walking through the 'young towns' on the outskirts of Lima, Peru, where children die from malnutrition and contaminated water, I would not have been able to reject the magical gift of making the dusty stone-covered streets into places where people could pick up any of the thousands of rocks and discover that they were croissants, coffee cakes, or fresh-baked buns, and where they could fill their cupped hands with stale water from the cisterns and joyfully

realize that what they were drinking was delicious milk."

Nouwen begs God like Isaiah, "Oh, God, split the heavens and come down! Prove yourself! Do something!"

But "no one knows," says Jesus, the day or hour when God will act, "not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son". He compares our situation to servants who wait for their master who has gone on a long journey without saying when he'll return. Our task is to remain vigilant and to "watch!"

Yet even now, we are not so different from the prophet of old, nor from Jesus or Paul and all the others who have prayed this way before us. We address the silent heavens and call on the distant One whom we cannot see. We urge on the God who seems so slow. Faithfully, like those before us, we enter once again into this Advent season of yearning and waiting.

Why? What's with this double make-believe that pretends both that we are now waiting for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem and that we really expect the heavens soon to open and reveal the Messiah "coming in clouds with great power and glory"?

Why again these candles and this ritualized longing? After all this time under an unbroken firmament, would not existential resignation and humane ethical resolve be more honest and ennobling?

I suspect that we choose to enact Advent's longing partly because it is preparation for whatever good will come in the holiday ahead, a practical delay of gratification in order that we might be hungry for the Feast. Perhaps we can even succeed now in readying ourselves in such a way that what we anticipate will come with the power of something unexpected, a surprise after all!

In addition, it may be that we value the faithful make-believe of Advent simply because hope is sweet and despair is bitter. Indeed, perhaps we have found in the season's mood of anticipation the first, even the best, gift of Christmas, the one we get to open early.

I tell myself also, each Advent, that there can be something ethically and spiritually edifying about this exercise, to take special care to note the shape of the darkness in which our candles burn.

What is the need for which I need Jesus to come, and the hurt I want him to heal? Where is the light most needed? If the heavens do open at Christmas, where and with whom will I hear the angels sing? Such inquiries may be helpful, individually and communally, even if nothing stirs above us.

But I think that there is a vital human solidarity at stake here, as well. I cannot help joining Isaiah and Jesus and Paul and all the rest of them, longing for the heavens to open, for justice to come for the living and the dead, for mercy to make right this damned and beloved world.

I will not choose indifference or resignation. I want to be among those who watch and hope, even when the hope feels like barely more than despair. It is after all the human solidarity in which God chose to be enfleshed, in Jesus...even as he prayed to the still un-answering sky.

And perhaps God did then stir in the heavens, unseen above Golgotha. Perhaps those heavens actually opened for shepherds to hear a song of peace one night, and later on so

that the Holy Spirit could attend a baptism at the Jordan River. And perhaps they will at last open for everyone, so that every eye may see.

Is this not the vision of faith that redeems us as we wait?

And then sometimes, some blessed and holy times, such an Advent alchemy works in us such that our own hearts stir to feel the stirring of God. Not yet so powerful, not yet quite visible, but more, we think, than just imagined. While the sky still appears opaque and silent, seeds quicken in the dark soil.

A child stirs in the womb.