

1st Sunday of Advent
Sermon 11.29.20

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.” (513)

I’ve been getting ready for some arrival lately, at home, getting ready, getting ready. But no one is coming. I know this. No one *can* come. We’re not allowed into each other’s lives like that these days. And yet, I’ve been acting otherwise—getting everything ready, a newly placed lamp in some previously dark corner, a rearranged room, even setting up the guest room, piling the towels high in their little shelf so whoever stays there doesn’t have to ask, “Can I get a towel?”

But no one is coming.

My family is being very patient with my madness—this playing house, this urgent need to be ready, though for what?

It's a faint version of the posture the people were keeping in the world. According to the prophecy of Isaiah, the people were vacillating between hope and despair at this point, anticipation and resignation, urgently getting ready, but for what? They'd been in Babylon for a long time now, fifty years or so, two whole generations of people born, two whole generations of people to have died. It was a time with a traumatic beginning, so no amount of good fortune in Babylon could make the situation okay.

And the people did have some good fortune in Babylon. They could make and market goods there. They could marry, and even intermarry. They had children, grandchildren. Really, the longer they stayed there, the more enmeshed they became there.

And this was part of the problem. These were a people supposed to be distinct. Their dietary laws, their religious practices: these were supposed to set the people apart, hold them as distinct.

Empires have a way of mowing over such distinctions.

Tom Brokaw: did you know this? He's from Texas and he had to work really hard to rid himself of his Texan accent. In order to be NBC's voice for America, he had to get rid of that localized sound. Did you know that? Apparently a very strong Texas accent. It just wasn't right for the nightly news.

As for *this* empire, Babylon, the Judeans in its midst had had such a violent beginning there. Babylon attacked Judea, burned Jerusalem into submission, pulled the Temple down enormous stone by enormous stone. Then it took the people into exile who would be worth a lot in Babylon, left behind amidst the smoldering rubble the people who'd be worth a little—the old, the sickly.

And with that the Judeans would be Babylonians, sort of.

When things begin badly, though, it's really hard to redeem them. No good fortune could make up for any of that.

Tobias' age-group spent much of Thanksgiving, apparently, on social media denouncing the whole day. "Thanks-taking," it had come to be called.

“What if this isn’t a holiday about history but about the present?” I kept asking him. “Can’t it be true that the first Thanksgiving wasn’t what we’d like it to have been, that the Wampanoag and other First Nations deserve a time of reckoning from us white people, while also it’s true that we all have much to be thankful for and it’s right to set aside a day to think on these things?”

My one Native American friend posted a couple times that day on social media, about how she was spending her Thanksgiving, which she called Thanksgiving. This, though where she lives in Montana has been ravaged by COVID, and before that by alcohol and opioids, by suicide—one more young man gone to COVID as of two days ago. And she’s at the center of it all, a resource to her community like most of us could only ever hope to be.

Taking stock is literally about assessing your livestock and other such stock to recognize all that’s been provided for you, and what it’s for—your own wellbeing, but also the wellbeing of others.

I imagine the Babylonians were as gracious and as greedy as regarded their new acquisitions, these Judeans, as any people ever are. These Judeans: they’d be let to live here, even to flourish here. But they’d never really *belong* here. So, the people wanted to go home, to Judea.

By this point in the prophecy of Isaiah, that was a real possibility. The Assyrians had come to reign, getting Babylon to retreat. And the Assyrians were fine with the Judeans going back to Judea—to rebuild and replant and restore and restock.

This book, Isaiah, spans three distinct phases in the life of the people.

First Isaiah speaks to us from the time of impending attack, the prophet on fire with judgment about why this should be, what injustice the people had fallen into that had God withdraw God’s blessing from them. Meanwhile, of course, the whole region was vulnerable to the lusts of Babylon, its drive to take over—and Jerusalem, that shimmering prize of a city, had fallen under its lusty gaze.

Second Isaiah speaks to us from exile, when the people had suffered the worst and were now taking stock. This too is a voice of judgment, calling to mind all the ways the people had strayed from their original covenant. This had been to make of them a nation of justice and righteousness. This had been a way to set them apart, and above, other nations. They answered to

a higher call. But they had strayed so to become more like other nations, where power and exploitation are basically what life is all about.

Third Isaiah had an eye on return. Now that Assyria was on the rise, which had Babylon in retreat, going home would be possible, rebuilding, restoring.

It was going to be possible. It was going to be *hard*.

How do you rebuild a society of broken parts?

How do you rebuild when your building blocks are all trauma, displacement, dispossession, loss?

Why isn't it enough for white America to give its First Nations some reserves of land where they can make their own way?

Why isn't it enough for the dominant paradigm to say to its Black citizens, "You're free now, and you can use whatever water fountain you want"?

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" Some clear show of justice! Someone trustworthy and true to show us the way, to show us *all* the way! Someone we can all get behind because it's just so obvious that this someone is so good. To dissipate the fog of trauma and loss, of resentment and longed-for comeuppance: someone to put the past to rest and to usher us all into the new.

Apparently, one of Donald Trump's major donors wants his money back, is suing to get his millions of dollars back. He'd given a ton of money to the cause of making the election go for Trump, but now that this is apparently a lost cause, he wants his money back.

A friend posted on Twitter an article about it with the dry-witted note, "You hate to see it."

"But do I?" I tweeted back. "Do I hate to see it?"

Would that I did. Would that I were someone who didn't dance and sing at the possibility that those in Trump-land might turn on one another, the snake-pit I always suspected it was. Would that this were a world where I could—trust that justice would come in some form other than revenge, trust that justice would come in such a way as all would feel it as justice. Would that this were a world wherein the Lord of all, the Lord of love and life, were simply to arrive, and all would see and know that we have nothing to fear ever again, we have no cause to fight ever again.

Time was this arrival would be ferocious. Time was this arrival was imagined as to be ferocious—a show of might and dominion that no eye could refuse in seeing, no mind could fail to

recognize. But those days are gone now. Even by the time of Third Isaiah's prophesying, those days were gone. That was the mythic past—the Red Sea parting, Mount Sinai with its fire and smoke. Now was the time of history, when the arrival of the Lord wasn't felt so much as ferocious sudden presence but as aching, desperate absence.

Absence as presence: could this be? Could this be the beginning of presence, this, the recognition that something essential is missing? For here might be the first moment of arrival—the felt presence of absence, and its attendant anticipation that it shall return.

My guest room is empty—and yet it is a guest room. It's ready for you, whoever you are, whenever you can safely stay here.

In that recognition of what's missing is the beginning of its presence.

The problem with that is...

Denise Levertov begins her poem "Immersion" with this line: "There is anger abroad in the world, a numb thunder, / because of God's silence." And I suppose that might be true. But worse is where there is no such anger, no such numb thunder, because at least in these things there is the recognition that God is largely silent to us, but moreover there's the recognition that God *is*, that God is at all. Many people fail to recognize even that.

Interesting, don't you think, that, over the course of this short passage from Third Isaiah, the Lord goes from being longed for as a force that would shake mountains to being longed for as a potter, which figures us as clay—as if the Lord does indeed know how to build but with broken parts, broken-down parts. Clay that's been kneaded and thrown and cut is the clay that won't explode in the kiln. That's the good clay. If you're a potter, you want to use that, you want to make of your clay that—kneaded, thrown, cut.

If you're a preacher, though, you want to be careful with a metaphor like this. It shouldn't be used to excuse when a people gets thrown and beaten and cut. But it does suggest that sometimes promise abides in surprising states and places. And then a people might become as a vessel for provision, a vessel of blessing poured out. And God might be understood as creative, radically creative, not just mighty.

I grew up praying in church: "Almighty God..." As a grown-up I much prefer praying in church: "Gracious God..."

Mark writes from a traumatic time, too. The earliest extant gospel to be written, around the year 70, Mark speaks urgently from just after the imperial destruction of the 2nd Temple, though this time it was the Roman Empire doing the destroying, the emperor Nero, he whose name could be stated numerologically, “666.” Jerusalem had yet again been a shimmering prize of a city, and its people had been tolerable to Rome, but barely. They still really liked to be set apart, not to be absorbed into empire and so made to serve.

Now among them, though, were these so-called Christians who were as recalcitrant in their refusal to regard the emperor as a god, but were secretive too in their gatherings, so you never really knew what they’d be up to.

They made everything less stable—and stability has its merits.

It was at Mark’s time that the Roman War against the Jews would begin, spanning sixty years and amounting to over a million lives lost. Because of this war, Jews who were once a significant minority around the Mediterranean, would become a tattered, scattered remnant of a people. Yet these things must be—all that suffering, the sun even turning dark and the moon not giving its light. This is just the nature of the world; this is just the nature of history and humanity. These things must be.

Does this surprise you? Dear listener, does this shock you?

Well, just look at the world. Can you deny it?

But listen, when these things are taking place, you know that the Son of Man is near, at the very gate, at the very liminality of reality.

The Son of Man doesn’t stabilize things. The Son of Man transforms things. Jesus isn’t here to serve the status quo. Jesus is here to redeem, and that’s a very destabilizing prospect.

Jason Stanley, political philosopher, in his researching neo-Nazis and the KKK, found that these groups purport Jews support such things as Black radicalism, feminism, gay rights, and disability rights because they long to overthrow the traditional order. Stanley tweeted these findings hoping to lay bare then anti-Semitism at the heart of neo-Nazis and the KKK, indeed the evil at the heart of such groups. I tweeted in reply, “As a Christian, I support such things as feminism and gay rights, too; and this is precisely why, if not to overthrow the traditional order than it least to attempt to redeem it.” I owe no allegiance to the traditional order. I ally myself with Christ, to the degree that I can, which isn’t very much, I’ll grant you

If you're with me on this, I'm sorry to have to tell you that, this year, following Mark's gospel and his remembrance of Jesus, we're going to be on a very destabilizing ride. Mark's Jesus has no interest, and still less ability, in maintaining the status quo. On the contrary, when Mark's Jesus shows up, everything around him changes. It is in his mere arrival in a place that the place reorders itself, evil takes flight, unholy Spirits dissipate while what's holy spreads and fills.

For this, when things totter and seem to split or break, we can know that Jesus is near—coming near in this momentous opportunity to redeem the time, coming near in this momentary chance to access the holy and for this moment to do what's right. To love, to act in grace, to show forth kindness and mercy, to be a human amidst powers and principalities that act in often grossly dehumanizing ways and even for the sake of dehumanizing, as if to strip us of our humanity is a chief aim. To stand and to act in soft resistance of all that: Mark's Jesus would have us do the hardest simple thing there is.

This is the one who is coming. This is the one for whom we wait, for whom we get ready.

Hey, you want to hear something funny? My guest room? Since it's going to stand empty for quite a long time, I made it my Zoom sanctuary. I'll be leading worship throughout the winter there, throughout Advent—waiting, watching from there.

Truth is, I hesitated in making it my Zoom sanctuary because I really wanted it to be a guest room. Oh, well.

Thanks be to God.