

First Sunday of Advent  
Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37  
December 3, 2017

## Advent I

I imagine that I am not the only one whose attitude toward keeping up with the news has changed in the past year. There was a time when I would return from morning exercise eager to grab the *Tallahassee Democrat* lying in the driveway. Even before that first sip of coffee, I would scan the front page to learn the latest. I admit, I usually skipped the articles about FSU football, but the rest of the news I used to devour with relish.

After digesting the local rag, I would fire up my laptop and see what was happening in the world outside of Tallahassee. At the very least, I would check the websites for the *New York Times* and *the Washington Post*.

Lately, however, keeping up with the headlines has lost its savor. I must brace myself before slipping the plastic bag off the morning *Democrat*, reminding myself that it is my civic duty to read the local newspaper. And as for the online news, my finger hovers for several seconds before I hit the bookmark that takes me to the web.

Perhaps you have developed a similar aversion. It takes mental and spiritual effort to expose one's self to stories about public leaders who deny the reality of human-caused climate change, about elected officials suspected of dealing under the table with lobbyists, about tax-cut bills that benefit the rich at the expense of the poor, and about yet another provocation prompted by a president who tweets first and is asked questions later.

I kept thinking the news would get better – that policy makers would listen to the scientists, that leaders would act ethically, that the common good would take precedence over the special interests of billionaires, and that Mr. Trump would be miraculously shut out of his Twitter account.

Alas, it hasn't happened. Makes you wonder if God might be asleep at the switch – or even worse – that God might have given up on us, leaving us to stew in our own juice.

That's not a new worry. The prophet we call "Third Isaiah" did not read online newspapers or surf the internet, but he did wonder about God's apparent absence from the scene. To get a feel for the setting of this morning's first scripture reading, you have to imagine yourself part of that band of former exiles recently returned to Israel from long years of captivity in Babylon.

You have no personal memory of what Israel was like before its defeat at the hands of the Babylonians. You are the child or perhaps the grandchild of those original captives who hung their harps on the willows by the waters of Babylon, and got all choked up when they tried to sing the Lord's song in that foreign land.

You've been raised on stories about the wonders of the Promised Land, but now that you're there, you look around, and all you see are the remnants of what used to be. Scattered stones marking the outline of Jerusalem's city wall. A few tiles from Solomon's grand temple. Enough to break the hearts of the few old folks in your contingent, but very little to hang your own hopes on.

The prophet cries out to God in words that have both an ancient and a contemporary ring:

**O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence . . .  
to make your name known . . . so that all the nations might  
tremble at your presence!**

Where are you, God? Can't you see what a mess we're in? Look at the ruins of Jerusalem all around us. Look at the headlines in today's newspaper. Check your Twitter feed, for God's sake, God. We are in a bad way, and we need help right now.

When are you going to make Israel great again?  
When are going to make America great again?

**O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . .**

The prophet reminds the Lord of occasions when the Lord did intervene – when the mountains shook, when the Red Sea parted, when Pharaoh's chariots were tossed into the sea, when there was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

**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.**

Here we are, waiting. Where are you, God? We don't hear the heavens being torn open. We don't see your mighty hand at work.

We do see – or at least some of us see -- how we have sinned, how far we have fallen short of your best hopes, how we have made such a mess of your creation. All our self-professed **“righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.”** We can see that now.

We see how we have placed our hopes in a false messiah who promised greatness, but instead, out of his own smallness, has made everything smaller. Lies have become the new normal. Greed masquerades as virtue. He told us he alone could fix what was wrong, but we closed our ears to the presumption – indeed, to the blasphemy -- inherent in that claim. Now, with the prophet, we say:

**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 (own) iniquity.**

As much as the prophet would like to blame God for God's apparent absence, he is honest enough to admit that the fault might not lie with God. Maybe it's God's people who have hidden their face from God. Perhaps God is present after all, not in the glory that once was, but in the ruin we bring upon ourselves.

Not only do these words of Isaiah 64 express the desperation and longing of God's people long ago. They resonate uncomfortably with today's headlines and our own deep need to re-connect with God.

This prophetic message comes to us on the First Sunday of Advent. Advent means “coming.” In Advent, we recall God's coming to us as Emmanuel, God-with-us. To accomplish that coming, God did not tear open the heavens. Instead, God came through the back door of a stable, born to a slip of girl named Mary and her husband Joseph.

Not a grand entrance on God's part, but a self-emptying: God's self poured out in Jesus Christ -- "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God."

In Advent, we recall that first coming. We remember the night when the heavenly host sang "Alleluia" and the shepherds worshipped at the manger.

In Advent, we also embrace a longing for God to put things right, for Christ to come again, this time not as the child of Bethlehem but as the judge of all the nations, the Son of Man, who sits on the divine throne of accountability.

In Advent, we recall Jesus' own admonition to put our house in order – to stay awake, to watch, for we do not know the day or hour when we will **"see the Son of Man coming in clouds with power and great glory."**

We wait for coming of the Son of Man by remembering who we are and whose we are. With the prophet of old, we recall God's covenant promise and the good news that, despite the mess we have made, we are still God's children. We remember who is the potter and who is the clay. We recall that the Son of Man is not only the judge of all, but also the One who comes to set the captives free and to bring good news to the poor.

Cynicism or retreat from the realities that scream to us out of the headlines are not options for those who wait for the Lord. Instead, we must align our lives with the priorities of the kingdom that is coming. We wait for the grace that comes along with judgment, the love that will not let us go, the Son of Man who, before taking his place on the throne of judgment, took our place on the cross of Calvary.

**O, that you will tear open the heavens and come down . . .**

God has, and God will.

Thanks be to God.