

## 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent – December 3, 2017

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

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” Have you ever felt that way? Surely you recognize that the world as it is is not the world as it’s meant to be – not the world God intended us to have. Surely you’ve been frustrated at our seeming inability to make the world a better place for more than the few who have engineered things to work in their favor – the dictators, the oligarchs, the kleptocrats, and their enablers? Haven’t you ever wished that God would suddenly appear and make clear to those guys that they can’t continue to exploit and oppress without consequences – that they have to stop it now? Doesn’t it bother you at least a little that God does not choose to work that way? On the other hand, doesn’t it feel sometimes, as Isaiah writes, that God is hiding from us and has “delivered us into the hand of our iniquity” – left us to the consequences of our selfishness, our indifference, and our cruelty?

We’re back at the beginning of a new church year this morning, and yet somehow not much seems new. The readings are still all apocalyptic and ominous. And that’s because the church year kind of bends around on itself and ends up where it started, or starts where it ends up. We hosted the pastors and lay professionals from our local synod conference here at Grace this past week and in our service of Morning Prayer I compared the church year to the experience of astronauts who went to the moon. One of them had the job of staying in lunar orbit while the other two went down to the lunar surface. He went around and around the moon, and at the end of each orbit he could see out in front of him the earth that they would all hopefully return to. But then it was back around again, and again, until his two comrades returned and they could finally break orbit and head back home. The church year is kind of like that. We go around and around, and at the very end and the very beginning, the destination is in view. We start the church year at the end, looking at where we are ultimately headed: the day when Christ will return in all his glory and his kingdom finally comes in all its fullness. And that is a good thing. It’s good to know where you’re going to end up so that you can concentrate on the task at hand. That’s why at wedding rehearsals a good wedding coordinator will start with the bride and groom and all the attendants standing where they’ll be during the service. Then they’ll practice waking out, and only then will they practice walking in. And when they finally practice walking in, it is so much easier, because they know right where they’re going. So the first message of the first Sunday of Advent is this. Do not worry. God is coming. The ending is taken care of. God will indeed tear open the heavens and come down once more. We are give a vision of how the journey ends so that we can focus on the task at hand.

And what is the task at hand? It is to “keep awake,” to “beware,” to “keep alert,” or – another way of translating these ideas – to “pay attention.”<sup>1</sup> Advent is the season of waiting and expectation that in some ways encapsulates the whole of the church’s life between Jesus’ ascension and his final return. But our wait is not meant to be passive. We’re not meant to wait like we wait for a train, or for a doctor in a waiting room. As we wait we’re meant to be active, and to pay attention – not so much to the signs that then end is near, because those will be obvious – but we are rather to pay attention to the signs that the kingdom is already *here*. We’re entering the year of Mark today, and the very first words out of Jesus’ mouth in Mark’s gospel are these: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.” And this happens right in the first chapter, right after Jesus’ baptism, just as he his coming up out of the water. He looks

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<sup>1</sup> The NRSV itself translates βλέπετε in Mark 4:24 as “pay attention.”

up and he sees, (get this,) the heavens torn apart! And then the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove from heaven. Isaiah's plea is already being answered right at the beginning of Jesus' earthly mission. God is already at work doing what we so want God to do – to come down here and fix things. Mark's message is that God is doing that through Jesus. And if we follow the story all the way through to the end, we will see that God is continuing that through us.

Another way to say “pay attention,” or “keep awake” is “stay woke.” I like to think this is how Jesus would talk to his disciples in our time and place. “Stay woke.” Are you familiar with that expression? “Woke” is a term that dates from the period of the civil rights movement, and it means being aware of social and racial injustice, particularly coming to see it where you hadn't seen it before – even though it was right there in front of you. Right now the whole country is become at least a little bit “woke” where sexual harassment and abuse are concerned. They've been around forever, of course. They are deeply imbedded in our culture – and I think it's fair to say in most cultures throughout history. They used to be tolerated, dismissed as “boys being boys,” or enabled by a conspiracy of silence. Now we're finally calling them what they really are: harassment and abuse, and we are breaking the silence that has kept them hidden. Maybe something will actually change this time. Because that is the point of paying attention and being “woke.” Right after Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was near, the next thing he did was to call for repentance. Repentance means changing minds and attitudes and no longer insisting on doing things the way we've always done them. Becoming aware of Sexual harassment is just one example of paying attention and staying awake in this in-between time. There are many, many others. “We are in captivity to sin and cannot free ourselves,” both personally and corporately. It is only by paying attention that we can become aware of injustice and evil, and the part we play in them, and it is only through such awareness that repentance becomes possible and the gospel of God's love and forgiveness can be heard and received.

A final word of encouragement that is not in our Gospel reading today, but it is in the verse that comes right before it begins: “Be alert,” says Jesus, and this can also be translated, “Pay attention.” “Pay attention,” Jesus says, “I have already told you everything.” And that is just what we are preparing to do as we begin a new church year, as we prepare to go again through the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection in this new church year, this time using the Gospel according to Mark. In this story of God coming among us as one of us, for us and our salvation, and in the community of believers that is created and sustained by God's word of grace, God has given us everything we need. May we pay attention in this new church year. May we attend to the treasure of our faith, and watch closely signs of the times. May we keep awake. May we get “woke” and stay that way, confident that the heavens *have* been torn apart, that God *has* come down, and that we have a roll to play in God's mission to save the world. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.