

1st Sunday of Advent (B) – December 3, 2023
Mark 13:24-37, Isaiah 64:1-9

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” I don’t know how that opening verse of our first reading this morning strikes you. Does it resonate with you? Or does it seem odd and quaint? Maybe it would help to think as ancient people did about the sky as a literal dome, above which God lives. Then it’s easier to catch that Isaiah is asking for God to break through that barrier and come to us. Does that help? Isaiah is writing from place of frustration and disillusion, maybe even despair and wants to spur God into action. God seems to be missing in action. God used to do marvelous things, mighty acts that made that nations of the world sit up and take notice. But now God is hiding and we are left to deal with the mess that the world has become. Is that more relatable? These words were written down twenty-five centuries ago and yet they seem to fit so well the world that we are living in right now. Where is God in the midst of terrorist attacks? Where is God in the midst of oppression? Where is God in the midst of unjust wars and unspeakable atrocities? Those are the biggies, but there are also all sorts of tragedies closer to home, like drug addiction, like failed relationships, like poverty. You can come up with your own list to bring this closer to home. When the world falls apart, whether globally or in your own little corner of the world, it is sometimes hard for people of faith not to question how God is choosing to be involved in the world. Or not.

I wrote in my newsletter article for December about how the church year bends around on itself like a space capsule orbiting the moon, and here we go around again, starting another church year on the tail of the one just past. I’m sure you’ve noticed that each time we do that we change the Gospel we read from for most of the year on a three-year cycle – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark is the Gospel that we are starting today, and it is probably the best example of all the Gospels of how the church year is meant to work. Scholars tell us that Mark was the first Gospel to be written. It’s also the shortest of the Gospels. But what it lacks in material it makes up in its overall theme and structure, and how it was meant to be used in the churches it was originally written for, namely that it was meant to be read over and over again, with something new happening each time through. So today, as if to emphasize this dynamic, we start not at the beginning of Mark (we’ll get there next week), but near the end, in chapter 13. This is the apocalyptic chapter of Mark, with Jesus is talking about the coming of the Son of Man.

We have tended to think that this is about the distant future. And that is a sensible conclusion, because we know that it has been almost two thousand years since these events, and Jesus has not come back yet. But context is everything, you have heard me say before, and it is easy to lose the context of today’s passage when we read it in isolation from the rest of the Gospel. Keep awake is how our passage ends. Keep alert for the coming of the Son of Man. It feels like Jesus’ parting words to the disciples. He has taught, he has healed, he has raised the dead. He has been crucified and resurrected. And now we wait for his return. But this is not the end of Mark’s Gospel, so it would be strange to take Jesus’ words about keeping awake as if we were already at the end of the story. His crucifixion hasn’t even happened yet. That begins in the next chapter with Jesus’ Passover dinner with the disciples, after which he goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He brings three disciples with him and instructs them to, what? Stay awake! Pay attention. Something really important is about to happen. (And what do the disciples do? They fall asleep! This is a theme of Mark’s Gospel, that the disciples miss what is going on. More about that in a minute.) What follows, as we know, is Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion. And that’s what we need to be awake for.

But for this to make sense we need to remember the beginning of the Gospel. We're at the seam of the church years today, and we need to sew the seam together, to connect the end to the beginning. So back for a second to chapter one, where we'll be next week and then most of January and into February. And specifically there I want us to remember Jesus' baptism. Listen to this (it's verse 10): "... just as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw *the heavens torn apart* and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." The heavens were torn apart. Only Jesus sees it, and only we the readers get to know about it. The heavens are torn apart and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" Here it is, happening in secret at the beginning of Mark's story. Secrecy is another theme in Mark that I'll talk about another time.

That is not the only place in Mark where the heavens are torn apart. The other place is right at the end. When Jesus breathes his last breath on the cross, the curtain of the temple is torn in two, from top to bottom. Mark's original audience would have immediately caught what that meant. The curtain of the temple separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the building. The Holy of Holies was a room at the far end of the temple where the ark of the covenant was originally kept. Only the high priest could go into that room, and then only once a year. It was the place God lived on earth. The curtain itself, we know from contemporary sources – and again the people Mark was writing to would have known this – the curtain of the temple was embroidered with an image of the heavens, the sky, with the stars and the sun and the moon. So when the curtain of the temple is torn in two at Jesus' death, it is the heavens that are being torn apart, the stars begin to fall, and the centurion standing watch over Jesus announces, "truly this was the Son of God." This is what we're supposed to be awake for, heavens being opened and God coming down.

There are only sixteen verses left in Mark after this, and half of them are about the resurrection. But we don't get to see the risen Jesus in Mark. The women go to the tomb and are met by a young man, a messenger, who tells them that Jesus has been raised, and to go tell the disciples to meet him back in Galilee. The women flee the tomb in terror and say nothing to anyone. And that's how Mark ends.

The disciples in Mark's story continually miss what is happening. They fall asleep when they're supposed to stay awake. They run away when Jesus is arrested and miss the thing they're supposed to pay attention to. The women at the tomb also run away in fear. But the disciples of the church that Mark is writing to get to witness everything that happens. And they know how to meet Jesus in Galilee. They know that they can go back to the beginning of the story where Jesus begins his earthly ministry, and now in reading through the story again they can recognize that it is the risen Jesus who has been with them all along in their reading of the story. Of course he has! Mark doesn't get written down until something like 40 years after Jesus' resurrection. For them and for us there is no way to read this story without knowing that Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia! And then we realize that of course the women told someone. How else would we know the story? And so we read through the story again and recognize that as the church, the body of Christ in the world, this story is our story. We have become the agents of Christ's teaching, his forgiveness, and his healing. We are how God chooses to be involved in the world. We are the ones entrusted with making God's presence and healing and forgiveness known in the world, and announcing that God is right now in the process of reclaiming and restoring the world even as it seems to be falling apart all around us. So here we go again, back around the church year, back through our story, with another chance to keep awake and to see how God is working in, through, and around us, confident in the resurrection life that is already ours now, and will be ours in the life of the world to come. So keep awake, sisters and brothers in Christ. The best is yet to come. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.