

## **Awake, Awake**

Isaiah 64:1-9

Mark 13: 24-37

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### *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.”

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So here we are! The bells are ringing, little children are singing, the candles are being lit, the sanctuary is greened and festive, and we have sung, ‘O Come, O Come Emmanuel.’ We have already had a great community December celebration yesterday as our fun and delicious Cookie Walk was one of the many ways to enjoy ‘Hillsborough for the Holidays.’ Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, Cyber Monday and Giving Tuesday most likely got our Christmas shopping off at a sprint. Many Christmas trees are up and homes are lit and decorated. Letters to Santa are being written and rewritten. Elves on the shelves are watching. Poinsettias are purchased and holiday cards are being created. The Christmas spirit is in the air. Creches are being set up as the journey to Bethlehem begins.

But then we hear our Scripture passages this morning, anticipating that beginning of the journey to Bethlehem. But that is indeed not what we hear from the prophet Isaiah. No angelic announcements. No calls to travel for a census. Instead we hear anger, lament and repentance.

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!

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.

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’s Gospel certainly also does not sound like the beginning of the story we were expecting. No Elizabeth pregnant with John the Baptist. No angel Gabriel speaking to Joseph the carpenter. Instead we hear of darkness, of end times that need us to be awake. No bright guiding star, but stars that do fall from heaven.

“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.

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. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Yet, we really are at the beginning--- the very, very beginning, of our story. We are not in Nazareth, not in Galilee, not yet. We are in Jerusalem, about 700 years before the Bethlehem journey story begins.

Isaiah was the prophet of judgment and hope. He prophesied about Israel’s enemies who would rise and overpower them as God’s punishment for their sins. He also foretold the coming of the Messiah, a descendant of David, who would be born of a virgin, suffer, and die for the sins of the world. A Messiah. Emmanuel, who would heal, redeem and restore us as a new creation.

As our story begins, the people have returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile, but they are going back to their old ways. Isaiah recalls God’s deeds of power and how other nations trembled in awe and fear. Now, the people are turning away from God because they do not perceive God’s presence among them. The prophet’s words are a prayer for God to remember that these are all God’s people, and God is the one, the only one, who can mold and shape them. God is the potter, God’s people are clay.

So why are we so far back into ancient history? Because this is our history, our story, too. It was not just our faith ancestors who turned away from God, who worshipped idols, who fell short of God's expectations, who gave false promises, who fought and feuded over land, who judged and rejected others for who they were, who grasped tightly rather than gave freely, who wasted relationships, who shattered trust placed in them. We too have become cracked with the experience of systemic sin: prejudice, oppression and fear. We too have become fragmented, building up walls instead of lending hands. We too need to be reminded anew of the hope and the promises that come to us because we are God's people. We too need to be reminded that a Messiah is coming—and why the Messiah is coming. We go back 700 years before Jesus was born to hear Isaiah's prayer for ourselves. 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. Our Advent hope, our Advent waiting, is for the coming of the Messiah.

Our Advent hope, our Advent waiting, is also in Mark's Gospel, which is taken from the last discourse of the One whose birth we are anticipating. The withered leaf of iniquity that Isaiah prophesied is now a fig branch sign that the Son of Man is near. He is not here yet, but we are already hearing his last earthly teachings. The One born Emmanuel says stay awake, pay attention, be alert. Live in expectation. Live now as you will when the Son of Man does return. No one knows when that will be, only God knows in which generation this will be. This is an unfulfilled hope still in our hearts 2,000 years later. But we wait, just as we wait for the journey to Bethlehem to begin. All the faithful are to live as if Christ will be revealed in our world and in our lives in a new way at any moment. The focus is blurry for what is to come when the Son of Man returns; the focus is clear on how we are to live our lives right now. What is out of focus will come into view. This is the meaning of Advent: "coming into view."<sup>i</sup>

Be awake, stay awake, that is how we will recognize the presence of Emmanuel. Be the clay in the hands of our Potter. Live in the hopeful expectation that all will come into view.

God of hope, we look to you with open hearts and yearning spirits. During this Advent season, we will keep alert and awake, listening for your word and keeping to your teachings. Our hope is in you.<sup>ii</sup> O come, O come, Emmanuel. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://rev-o-lution.org/worship-resources-for-december-3-2023-first-sunday-of-adven>

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew Kelly