

Reading Isaiah 64:1-4,8-9 & Mark 13:24-37

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...”
The prophet begs for intervention - and who could blame him? The world is gone pear-shaped, and the forces of doom seem to be gaining strength. The faithful are falling into old, destructive habits because they are discouraged; it feels like none of the remedies of faith are working. Prayers for peace yield no result; prayers for healing are shouted down by the sheer number of the suffering, sick and dying. The prophet lived in the midst of this chaos - exiled - diminished - frustrated beyond belief (literally!) Isaiah alone seems able to state the obvious; “We’re waiting, God - and not patiently; not anymore. Too much has happened - too much is at stake - we trusted you; we had faith! So do it. Exercise your mighty anger. Rage against the things that we rage against. Give us SOMETHING, for your own name’s sake.”

It feels like an Isaiah moment right now. Countless prayers have been raised – millions of voices have been heard – the faithful of every religion are united against a common, global foe, and what have we got? A virus that doesn’t listen to prayer; a pandemic that sings its own tune. And we’re frustrated. It’s discouraging. What good are our prayers, our actions, our righteous indignation? What can we do to shift this overwhelming feeling of anger, grief and despair?

Christmas. Let’s do Christmas.

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Christmas is the season that seems able to turn the vast majority of people into positive directions. The lights are brighter, the smiles are more often genuine; there is a feeling of real good will toward all about in the world as December winds its way toward January. Maybe Christmas can fix this. The lights - The music - The trappings and wrappings - it's time for some bloody JOY! And Christmas is our favourite excuse for joy.

Now – Isaiah wasn't a Christmas person... Isaiah was more of a 'let's put the Creator back in Creation' person. But when you get right down to it, it's the same sentiment.

And as much as the season seems sprinting toward us - it's the end of November, after all (and with precious little warning, it seems to me...) - Mark's warning tempers Isaiah's exuberance; 'Be ready. Keep awake.' You think you know what's coming, but you don't know when. Dec 25 is an arbitrary moment in time - fleeting, like all dates that we long for. The Christmas 'moment' will arrive as suddenly and stealthily as the proverbial 'thief in the night' (or in this case, as the boss returning from an extended vacation) and that sudden, miraculous moment will blow our tiny little minds.

Are you ready to be shocked by the gentleness of God's answer to our urgent, anxious, guttural cries of grief and longing? For that is what Christmas is; that's what Advent asks us to wait for.

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The intervention that we long for is likely to be as gentle as an evening breeze in summer.

The flicker of a candle flame – the glimpse of lights in a tree, set against the dark November sky – the sound of that tired old standard Christmas tune on the radio – each of these things is likely to surprise us as autumn darkens into winter, and “Christmas” creeps closer. The anticipation of a card in the mail, or a face on the video call; each of which you long for; neither of which you expected at that moment – these are glimpses of God’s gently persistent intervention.

We long for the moment when we can sing of the baby in the manger, or trade gifts with the magi, or gather with the faithful for our corporate acknowledgement that things will, once again, be okay. But the Christmas miracle of heavens torn open will only be a miracle if our hearts and minds are focused and ready for the many and subtle signs that our prayers have already been answered; that God has long been in our midst.