

## **The End of the World**

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Advent

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

“...and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.” Mark 13: 25

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Have you gotten over to the new aquarium yet? I haven't, but I understand it is awesome, the biggest thing to hit town since the Olympics. It's not your ordinary, everyday aquarium with the requisite number of sharks and squid. It is, in fact, the largest, brightest, flashiest display of the mysteries of the deep anywhere in the world. Phone lines are jammed with people wanting to buy tickets. People stand in line for hours to get in and go nose to nose with the hammerheads and hogfish, through the glass, of course. There are over 100,000 different animals representing 500 species at the new Atlanta aquarium. It's a big deal. I can't wait to go.

The other thing that seems to have everybody revved in Atlanta these days is the beginning of the holiday shopping season. It did not actually begin the Friday after Thanksgiving but before Halloween. You saw those candy canes and red velvet ribbons peeking out from behind the candy corn and plastic pumpkins at the drugstore. You heard 94.9 FM announce the continuous playing of your favorite Christmas carols days before a single Thanksgiving

turkey had been carved. But still, Friday marked a new level of pre-Christmas frenzy. People rushed into the stores as if they had been shot out of a cannon -- eager, pulsing masses of people, desperate to shop. At one store, the crush was so great, people were actually trampled; two had to be taken to the hospital. I heard a guy on the news, who had bought five DVD players, say that he couldn't wait to go back into the store so that he could buy five more. "I'm really praying they're going to let me go back in!" he said in a voice filled with longing.

Advent. The liturgical season that begins today invites us to consider a distinctly different kind of longing. The prophet Isaiah speaks for people languishing in exile. They long for that which this world can never give. God is whom they are after. They beseech the one and only, lofty, mighty God to descend in power and might to save them. In contrast to the opening of the aquarium, and the oh, so "now" buzz that surrounds it, Advent arrives with a distinctly different feeling, without fanfare and with more than a little amount of ambiguity. The color: purple. The music: haunting. The need for God, for salvation is named but not yet fulfilled. What is Advent like? It's like waiting in the lobby before the symphony begins. It's like the waiting room at the doctor's office. The nurse tells you that the doctor is busy at the hospital and she'll get there when she can. Advent is an in-between place

where we are brave enough to name what we long for. Both the readings for this first Sunday in Advent acknowledge very honestly the human experience of the absence of God. After all, if you feel God's presence, if you believe God is there, you would not pray, "O, that you would tear the heavens and come down." The prophet utters those words on behalf of his people who are far from home, in Babylon, away from Jerusalem, wondering where on earth God has gone. "You haven't shown yourself in a long time, Mr. Almighty. You have hidden your face from us. You have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity," which is a fancy way of saying: We know that we have made a mess of things but why are you, God Almighty, leaving us to stew in our own juices?"

With this level of honesty, it's no wonder there usually isn't a line wrapped around the church on the first Sunday of Advent. And yet, who among us here does not identify with the longing of the prophet? Who has not experienced, at one point or another, the absence of God or languished in some dark, hopeless place with no idea of how to get out of it on our own? Who has not grieved over the loss of that which once was good and is now no more?

The prophet's longings are not for himself or even for his people alone. He prays for the world's sake. This first Sunday in Advent, 2006, the world is

marked by violence, animosity, and ongoing bloodshed in so many places.

Just this past Thanksgiving Day, a suicide bomber blew up his car at a hospital just south of Baghdad. He killed thirty people and wounded forty.

Many of the dead and the wounded were children who had come to the hospital to receive food and toys being distributed by American soldiers.

When you read about a tragedy like that, what prayer can you pray other than “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”?

Like the prophet, we pray for our broken world. Think of the ecological crisis that the earth and its inhabitants are facing today as the consequence of

deliberate human choices. Episcopal priest and environmentalist Woody

Bartlett writes of visiting the San Diego Zoo some years ago. As he

wandered along the paths, his curiosity was piqued by a red triangle with a white E in the center of it, that he saw on many exhibit markers. He looked

in his guidebook and was startled to learn that every time the “E” appeared on a marker before an animal, that “E” meant the species was endangered.

He walked across the street to the natural history museum and learned there that the rate of extinction of species before the era of the dinosaurs was one

species every hundred years. At present, one thousand species disappear from the earth every single year. (1) “O, that you would rend the heavens

and come down and save us” from ourselves.

“Lord, you have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity, but now is the time for you to remember that we are your people. You are the potter. We are the clay. Remold our minds, restore the future that we are putting at risk.”

We identify with the helplessness, loneliness, and frustration of the prophet of long ago; the Advent Season has room for more than anxiety. The Christian story is the story of hope and trust. The Christian story is the story of how God answers our deepest longings and needs. God answers the prayers of the people at Christmas, but not in the manner people had anticipated. They had expected the earth to tremble and the stars to fall. But then, Jesus came, born to a young mother named Mary, in the quiet of the night. The only crowd he drew consisted of a few shepherds and the four-legged creatures who stood around the manger filled with hay. The earth did not appear to be changed when he was born or when he lived or when he died. After his death, some of his friends reported that they had seen him alive, but still, the world seemed the same. Forty years later, when Mark’s gospel was written, the world seemed the same. Nero had been persecuting the Christians. The Jewish-Roman war followed. Jerusalem was again destroyed. The Temple lay in ruins. Once again, the people were anxious, wondering what had happened to the promise God had made to set things

right and to repair all that was broken. They longed for the savior whom they had once had but who was now gone. Mark's gospel reflects the longing of the early church. "It is, above all else, an apocalyptic story, laced with the promise that those who are in distress should, nevertheless, be hopeful for the day is surely coming when all of the enemies of God will be defeated and the present world of suffering will be no more."<sup>(2)</sup>

The early Christians found strength to go on as they remembered the words and promise of Jesus that he would return in glory. The dramatic depiction in today's gospel reading of what is called the Second Coming is intended to instill hope. To people on the verge of concluding that nothing is ever going to change, the gospel says, "Hold on! God is on the move, headed toward you."

"Hold on," the season of Advent says to the church today. "God is on the move, headed our way. No, you will not stew in your own juices forever. Domination by the forces of darkness in the world and in our own souls will have the last word. God will set things right." Jesus had asked his followers to look with him at a little fig tree. "As soon as its branch becomes tender," he had said, "and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So, all around you, you will see signs that let you know that my Kingdom is near. I

will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you. I will make things right for the world.”

Have you ever read John McCain’s autobiography *Faith of My Fathers*?

Senator McCain tells of his five years in solitary confinement in a prisoner of war camp in Viet Nam. After one especially prolonged and painful interrogation session, he found himself thrown into a cell, one in which he had never been before. McCain writes, “I was at the lowest point you can imagine. But I discovered, scratched into the wall of that cell, these words, ‘I believe in God, the Father Almighty.’” This is the message of Advent. God will show. (3) There is nothing in heaven or on earth or above the earth, nothing in all creation that will separate us from the love of God made known in Christ Jesus our Lord. Jesus will show in the here and now, and in the end, he will come to judge the quick and the dead.

In the meantime, there are a couple of good things for us to do and one not so good thing for us to do. The most important thing for us to do is to hope in God. As one insightful person said of the Book of Revelation, the mother of all apocalyptic, end-of-the-world literature, the message is this: God will win against despair, against the forces of darkness. God will win. (4)

We will want to keep hope alive- for ourselves, for our broken relationships, for our despairing souls. There is a power that can conquer all of that. It is

the power of God's redeeming love which actually, literally intervenes in human hearts and in the human spirit. We call that power the power of God, the Holy Spirit who comes to make all things new. We also hope a great hope for that which is broken beyond ourselves. We hope for the people of the Middle East. We hope for the displaced people in the Katrina ravaged southeastern United States. We hope for the forgotten people of the Sudan. We hope for the oppressed and hungry and the abused all over the world. We hope for the millions of people without access to the life-giving drugs with which to fight HIV/AIDS. According to what we've heard today, the operating arena for the Son of God is from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. We dare not hope too small.

The most important good thing to do is to hope. The second is to keep on yearning, yearning for God because our need for the divine is the cradle in which faith is born within us. Our prayers build the path by which the Spirit of the Living God travels into our lives. I'm going to go out on a limb, now, and say that this crazy obsession everyone in our nation seems to have for things, stacking stuff up to the ceiling in their Best Buy shopping baskets, I believe that that really comes from trying to fill the God-place inside of us with things that are less than God, who is All in All.

The thing that we don't want to do is to think that we know how God is going to come and when God is going to come and what God is going to do. According to the scriptures, no one knows, except God, not even God's own son. Forget all the fantastic speculations about time tables and dire predictions about the end of the world, which seem all the rage these days. Here is a way to think about it. Last week, I started working on my 2006 calendar, putting in the dates of the Session meetings and Communion Sundays, speaking engagements. But it occurred to me that I can't really schedule any of the important things, because I do not know when they're going to happen. I do not know when joy is going to show up unexpectedly. I do not know when the stranger will bless my life, I don't know when I'm going to have the chance to speak my convictions, I don't know when God is going to give me a new opportunity to grow in a way I've never grown before.

I need to be alert because the important things that happen are unpredictable. They happen in God's own way and in God's own good time. What I need to do is what the servants in the little story Jesus told are called to do. That is to go on with the work I've been assigned. In the church, that work is the work of Christ, binding up the broken hearted, teaching by word and deed,

being kind, serving Christ in my daily tasks, even as I pray for a new heaven and a new earth. (5)

I close with a story a minister tells from his life before he went into seminary. He was a nurse who worked in a hospital for the mentally ill. He worked the night shift at the psychiatric hospital, a shift that ran from 11 p.m. until 7 a.m. He and all the other employees had been cautioned against falling asleep. And they were warned that if they were ever caught sleeping on the job, they would be fired immediately. He writes, “Staying awake when everyone else in the universe was sleeping was quite a battle for me, especially when I had worked the night shift all weekend and had had little sleep. Sometimes I would guzzle coffee. Other times I would go into the bathroom and splash my face with cold water. I lived in mortal fear of falling asleep and being awakened by my supervisor’s cold touch and hear her say, ‘Wake up, you’re fired.’

But then one night, it happened. Around 5 o’clock in the morning, I fell asleep. Sometime later I felt a surge of panic as my name was called. ‘John, wake up,’ the voice said. I picked up my head, expecting to see the face of my supervisor and to meet my doom. But instead, I saw the face of a friend, a nurse who worked at the far end of the hall on my floor. ‘John,’ she said, ‘I

just saw the supervisor's car pull into the parking lot,' I knew you were sleepy and so I came to make sure you were awake.'”

I think of Jesus as a friend like that. A friend who watches for us and with us, who calls our name and makes sure we do not suffer the consequences of or somnolence, makes sure we do not miss the possibilities of salvation when they come our way. (6)

“What I say to you, I say to all. Keep awake.” for every moment is alive with possibility, just as it was that night long ago when God tore a tiny opening in the heavens and slipped a baby through. His name was Jesus, and of his kingdom there will be no end. Amen.

Notes:

(1) Woody Bartlett, *Living By Surprise*, Paulist Press, 2003, p. 5-7.

(2) Notes, *The New Interpreters' Study Bible*.

(3) Fleming Rutledge, “Jesus Will Show,” *Help My Unbelief*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000, p. 223.

(4) Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Seasons of a Sermon*, Abingdon Press, 1999, p. 252, quoting a sermon by Hank Langknecht.

(5) Eugene Bay, *The Yearning of Advent and a Brief Statement of Faith*, PC

(USA).

(6) From a sermon by John M. Rottman, quoted in *The Four Seasons of a Sermon*, p.215.