

Come On Down

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

Today marks the start of a new liturgical season as the scripture readings for each Sunday start anew. In Advent, we join the season before, before God acts, before God's people are renewed, before new life comes to God's people. Advent is characterized by anticipation as well expectation. God has always been faithful to God's people. They wait upon the Lord.

These times are difficult ones for God's people. However, we should not imagine that these times were worse than other times; that would be a mis-characterization. As we encounter the story of the people of God, they are frequently in difficult times. Is the first century in the province of Judea so terrible? Compared to what? Compared to the Babylonian conquest? Compared to Noah's days of flood? Compared to slavery in Egypt?

By the beginning of the first century, Judea had been part of one empire or another for over 500 years. Some empires were better than others, but the Romans weren't the worst. They won't win any awards for their governance. The much acclaimed *Pax Romana* or "Peace of Rome" was accomplished with continual repression of subject peoples, and swift, extensive brutality for the troublesome and rebellious.

The Jews with their strange religious customs, their stubborn, even violent disavowal of the empire's gods and defiance of the emperor's authority made them a thorn in the side of Roman governors and administration. The Maccabean Wars in the second century BCE showed that the Jews were a cunning, determined, and unbowed foe that required prompt and powerful action lest things get totally out of hand.

In these times, like other seasons of trial and suffering by God's people, hope is sought in faith, the faithfulness of God to his people, and the awareness of the people that their God seems absent, but God's promise always remains. Truthfully, Advent is a season of uncertainty. God seems absent, but God's promise abides, and God is faithful ... right?

In our own lives, each of us has had those occasions when we wonder if God has taken a vacation while our world seems to dissolve in confusion, turmoil, and struggle. For many of us, it doesn't have to be a *whole lot* of confusion, turmoil, and struggle to make us wonder what's up with our lives, with our relationship with our God. What did I do wrong? How did I deserve this? Is this fair since every week for the last forty years I've been putting \$10 in the plate? Um, skip that last one. What happened to my God and what happened to my life? Those questions pop up as we wrestle with uncertainty.

The terms of this discontent has really changed little over the centuries, uncertainty coupled with faithful expectation.

And what is expected? Nothing less than a miracle, the intervention of God's will for justice, peace, and goodness to bring restoration and new life is hoped for. More than the miracle of Black Friday starting on a Thursday, or even a Wednesday as one might reasonably expect next year, God's people wait to see if God will once again be faithful to the covenant promise, even while knowing full well that God's people are a sorry and undeserving pack of sniveling weenies.

The prophet Isaiah sounds at times like Bob Barker or Drew Carey as he repeats his prayer that God should come [on] down, like it was time for *The Price Is Right*. Isaiah is praying for God to get in the game, to play a role, to make the sacred come alive in life's arena. *Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down ... Come down to make your name known to your enemies ... For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down.* You get the idea. God has been silent too long. The enemies of goodness, justice, and peace, the pretenders to kingdom sovereignty, have run amok long enough.

The people have been suffering, and where have you been, O mighty God? Our God is the only one who acts for those who *wait for him*. There is no other god like our Creator and Redeemer.

But the stumbling block of uncertainty appears as well. *But when we continued to sin ... you were angry. How then can we be saved?*

As God's people reach out to summon the God of their faith, they also become aware of their unworthiness, their sinfulness, their failure to keep the covenant faith with their God. *We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags. No one calls on your name, or strives to lay hold of you.*

Knowing of their undeserving status, the prophet voices the peoples' conclusion: *for you have hidden your face from us, and made us waste away because of our sins.* The fault of the people in their own predicament gets declared, a confession of sinfulness and an acceptance of the judgment that God has gone away from them.

But God and faith are not given up as the next line makes clear. The prophet returns to the beginning of God's relationship with his people: *Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.* Like disgraced children, they come before the Parent to bring a reminder of the indelible connection and relationship that remains forever between them. The statement itself is an articulation of a deep faith that trusts in the one who created them and their historic relationship.

After repeating their desire for forgiveness, the section concludes by seeking God's attention and, by such attention, the coming of God's blessing of hope and new life. *Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are your people.* Come on down, God.

In Jesus' time, the intervention of God in the lives of God's people was also sought. As we talked last week at the end of the liturgical calendar year about the end of

the age and the fulfillment of the promise as God's Messiah returns to invoke the Kingdom of God, so we begin in the same place.

All of Mark 13 is devoted to the signs of the end of the age. The earlier portion warns about deceivers and deceptions, painting a dire picture of calamity, persecution, and betrayal. The disciples are urged to be on guard and discerning.

In the section of our reading, Jesus details the dramatic coming of the Son of Man, when God comes on down. While it is a formidable season of threat and distress, it is also filled with promise for the faithful. The justice of God shall come-on down upon the earth and make all things new.

When would this happen? It will be plain for all to see. He cites the fig tree's changing with the season, a common understanding. They will know when the time has come with the same certainty. Within this is also the promise, *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.* The promise for the faithful will stand strong, as God is faithful to them, no matter what comes. God shall come-on down and the blessing of new life in the Kingdom will come to the faithful.

His final statement is for them to watch. They're like servants left in charge of the house while the owner is away. The owner shall come at some time, that much is certain. The servants are to keep a watch at the door for when the return happens. The faithful disciples are told to assume this role themselves. They are called to remain awake and alert, to watch for the time when God intervenes, when God comes-on down.

God's people today are similarly called to watch, to remain alert, to have faith in the promise of God that will be fulfilled.

Will the Lord's coming be in the upheaval of worldly order, in the catastrophic disturbance of the earth and the sky? Is that the way the promise of God will be fulfilled? Perhaps. Perhaps it will be just as it is written in Mark.

My guess is that those who are watchful, who look with a spirit of faith for the coming of the Lord will discover that God has come-on down in other ways. The revelation of God's justice and righteousness to those watchful and alert may be more common than we typically understand.

If we are watchful and alert to the Lord's ministry, and we are made witnesses to his ministry before us, then the promise is being fulfilled in our time, in our midst. No, it doesn't have the characteristics of a big, hairy apocalypse, but the power of God to transform with healing and new life isn't restricted to the big, hairy apocalypse.

In this season, may we be observant, watching, alert to the signs of the new age, the new way, that God has come-on down. And may we afford ourselves the opportunity to act in the power of the Lord's name as his living body in ministry, bringing hope in

trouble, peace to distress, and light into darkness, witnesses who become the signs of the Kingdom, and the promise fulfilled.