

Awake and Alert Amid Darkness

Isaiah 64: 1-9

Mark 13: 24-37

The pace of news developments has been breathtaking. On one hand, there are old, unresolved issues that are coming to light after having been secreted and hidden away from view. On the other hand, things are happening that are random, chaotic, and disturbing, provoking genuine anxiety about the future. I awake each day and wonder what's next, what happened overnight, what will happen today, and what does it mean for the future.

When we talk about chaos and confusion, disorder and formlessness, we might think of the opening verses of Genesis. *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.* Before God enters the picture, there is nothing but “the deep,” the primordial swirling mass of waters untamed and unbounded. It has no consciousness, no awareness, no structure, and no pattern. Amid the complete darkness exists a watery mass.

In our personal times of distress and anxiety, we experience the darkness of chaos, of events hurtling into our life with shattering impact. What had seemed stable and orderly, predictable and true, gets transformed into a turbulent river that carries us helplessly as it flows to a dark abyss. Adrenalin pulses us to hyper-awareness as panic and doubt surge in our spirits. You try to slow it down, to digest its impact, to restore order and structure. You review and rehearse and review and rehearse, spinning your wheels in an effort to get traction, to get leverage, to gain control and pull things together. It doesn't usually work.

Then, exhausting all efforts to hang onto or to recover what is truly lost, we try to interrupt fear and anxiety by actually confronting what has happened. Striving to be honest and get real and digest the new reality, we seek to begin the longer process of reconciliation, to find a way forward. It is when we seek the light to illuminate the way forward.

In the beginning, while all was formless and void, composed of primordial fluid undifferentiated from darkness, there we learn was the presence and promise of God who sought to bring form, meaning, and life to the formless void. God began the enterprise of creation first by creating light. Light would shine in the darkness to reveal the promise of God who was present in this creation, progressively making new things happen out of the midst of chaos and formlessness.

Chaos and confusion have a dis-spiriting effect. Without the ability to find meaning, and having lost the bearings that we expect, it becomes exhausting, like trudging through powdery beach sand or through snow drifts. Everything is more difficult, more of a struggle, and lacking the joy and spirit that signals positive progress, and affirms meaning and purpose. Gone from the daily routine, a treadmill of work and effort without benefit or blessing imposes a gloom. The community becomes a slum, and

the residents react with anger and bitterness to most everything. For all intents, the light has gone out that God had set forth at creation.

This is the scene for Isaiah's prophecy. Here it is Third Isaiah, the prophet speaking to the people of God who have returned from the exile in Babylon. For example, Second Isaiah had painted a bright, glowing picture of what was coming as the exiles returned home to Jerusalem and to the Promised Land. Now, 10-15 years later, the promise seemed unfulfilled as the people labored under a kinder, gentler occupier in the Persians, but still an occupier who had demands and expectations.

The people were dis-spirited and without a vision for how their lives would become better, for how their society would ever repair itself, for how they would ever again be a people together with their God.

Isaiah hears their sadness and understands their struggles. Isaiah prays 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 when Isaiah says: *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. Let your people know your presence and awaken to your promise. Let your creation begin anew among your people. Let your new life promise find its fulfillment now.

In Jesus' time, the intervention of God in the lives of God's people was also sought. Conditions had not really changed for the average person since Third Isaiah, only the occupiers had changed. The stifling presence of the Romans, the pervasive intrusion and influence of Hellenistic culture, and the entrenched nature of the system under which God's people grew the sense of hopelessness that there was any way of bringing meaningful change in this context. The talk gravitated to the supernatural, to God's intervention, the sending of the Promised One, a messiah who initiate the end times. In the apocalyptic vision that became popular in these times, only God's direct intervention could overthrow the powers that held God's people captive, and establish God's Kingdom in a calamitous struggle. The end of the age was the only thing that held any promise.

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 awake, alert, 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 be awake and alert, 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. They're called to remain awake and alert, to watch for the time when God comes 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 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.

Our new calendar year starts with Advent, and Advent starts in darkness. But amid the darkness lies God's promise. A candle is lit and the promise is given its witness. The light turns back the darkness and the presence of God who is in covenant with God's people is affirmed anew.

In this season, may we be observant, watching, alert to the signs of the new age, the new way, that God has come 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 of God to be fulfilled.