

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

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 for ever.

Now consider, we are all your people.

I take joy in being the first one to wish everyone a happy New Year. Yes, New Year. No, I'm not trying to pull a fast one on our thoroughly commercialized society that starts playing Christmas music even before Thanksgiving, by talking about New Year before Christmas. I sincerely wish us all a blessed New Year, because as a community of faith belonging to a larger Christian tradition, we begin our church year by turning our attention to, and wait together for the Coming of God. Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the season of holy waiting.

But if you are expecting to hear a gentle introduction or a prelude to that familiar Christmas story, you are in for a surprise. Hear now, the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark. Chapter 13: 24-37.

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 25 and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26 “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. 27 Then he will send out the angels and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. 28 “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. 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 32 “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. 34 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. 35 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, 36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

So, instead of a story of the beginning, we are given a story about the end of time, with a vivid image of cosmic upheaval, which is typical of apocalyptic writing. Chapter 13 in Mark is often called “the little apocalypse,” and this passage is about the return of the Son of Man, which will bring end to the world as we know it.

When we read from the Book of Revelation, we talked about the word “apocalyptic” as coming from the Greek verb meaning “to uncover or reveal.” It uses strong and strange symbolic images of cosmic scale to “reveal to us” something quite beyond our comprehension.

And apocalypse also has to do with the end of the world as we know it, and a destructive one at that.

In the apocalyptic traditions found in the Scriptures, in which Jesus was immersed and from which Mark was writing, the end is somehow related to the beginning. Scriptures tells us a story stretching from the creation of the universe to the eve of the cosmic end “revealed” in the Book of Revelation. In the end of time, all that had gone wrong since the beginning of time is destroyed and all power that opposed God’s will is defeated. All the goodness that had been lost since the beginning of the creation is restored at the end.

What is at the end is Cosmic Renewal. Renewal and not mere extension. Often people say “renewal” when what they really mean is extension; oh, it’s time to “renew” your subscription or “renew” your membership; it’s only a continuation of what is. Renewal entails restoration through transformation of what has become of the beginning; it is not just more of the same.

So, it’s not strange why Jesus used a fig tree putting forth new leaves on its tender branches as a metaphor for the sign of the coming of the Son of Man. This is the Biblical apocalypse, or the Biblical apocalyptic view of the world, and the ground of our hope.

And God is present throughout, as the beginning and the end, transcending time and space. But we live in the middle, between the beginning and the end, trapped in time and space. And the middle is a difficult place from which to see God’s beginning and end, and how God IS continuing to act in our lives in this middle of time, renewing and restoring all that is falling away towards that Cosmic Renewal of all time , we get lost in our “middle world” and we lose sight of God, or God seems hidden and absent.

Could you recall a time, or times, when you felt like God had stopped caring about you? When you didn’t feel God’s presence? We hear the cry of the people from this middle place, in the Isaiah passage Laura read for us this morning. Prophet Isaiah lends his voice to the lament of the people, longing for God to come down, again, to remember them as God’s people. They call God their Father; they are the clay and God is their potter, the relationship felt right....then, something went wrong, they had done wrong, and God is hidden.

But they remember the awesome act of God before, if not in their own personal history in the history of their people, when God made God’s name known to their adversaries. Like, when God parted the sea for their ancestors to escape the Pharaoh, or when God met Moses at the top

of the Mountain and gave them the Law, or like when... So, they plea, “God, you have done this apocalyptic act before, you have come down renewing everything.” No eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him; People have waited and God, you acted. So, we wait, expectantly for you to tear open the heavens and come down again. Because finally, you meet those who do right and remember God’s ways – in other words, those who keep awake.”

We may feel like God left us, like that man in Jesus’ parable who leaves home putting the servant in charge and tells the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

This has happened before. Those who stay awake know God is acting, even when God seems hidden from us, and they take note of those times God “came down.” Today’s passages began with Jesus’ words “in those days, after that suffering....” Jesus had been telling disciples how the Temple, which they were admiring, would be destroyed and Jesus was using those apocalyptic images from the Hebrew prophets of old to describe the world was about to turn.

Because all this is part of the greater movement of God’s creation, being spoiled, and being made anew to remain “the way God intended it” forever, and that is the end of our history and our time as we know it; but God’s reality is forever. God intends for us to be part of God’s forever reality. Keeping awake and being transformed in the meantime.

Apocalyptic lens helps us to learn from God’s act in the past, so we know how to live our present. Listening to Jesus talk to his disciples about the end of time teaches us this end is not just an empty end but the return of Christ who will rule forever. As we begin this season of holy waiting, these apocalyptic passages frame our life in the cycle, and bring our lives into the middle of the whole story of God, from God’s beginning and the end of Cosmic Renewal.

During Advent, we remember and celebrate that One Decisive Act of God when God sent Christ to be born into our space and time, which was God’s first coming into our world as a vulnerable infant, but because we are people living in the middle, between God’s beginning and end, we are also waiting for Christ’s coming again, his Second Coming, to make all things new.

Every time we sin, which is to say, we do something that miss the mark that God has set for us, we go off track and degrade the world of God’s creation. And it bothers God. Like God gave us a present that works perfectly for our enjoyment, assuming we’d be smart enough how to work it, and we ignore the operational manual and breaks it. Or, it is like God set us at a trailhead with a good old map in hand which would lead us to a beautiful vista, but we think we’re smarter

and chuck the map and opt to rely on our smartphones, but we go off the grid to where there's no signal and our phones are useless and we get lost. That's what our "fall" is like. We may, in life fall off from the cliff, but we don't fall from Grace of God. There's Divine do-over, but how far off the trail we go before God says ok, let's try another way, we don't know.

Being on God's side is being on the side of whatever that preserves Creation, nurture life, restores wholeness in a person, society, and the world. We keep awake by staying involved in those efforts. So, if you stay awake and follow Christ in this coming year, you will be renewed and transformed into a different, if not better, truer version of the image of God you are created to be. For God is doing a new thing, in you and through you, our world.