

Advent 1—Year B
Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
I Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

And so we begin again. The calendar says our year is drawing to a close, but the Church says, “*We begin again, today.*” **The First Sunday of Advent and the start of the new church year, and Advent means (pause) “coming”**—the season when we mark **the coming of the Holy One, both the first coming and the second coming; that ultimate consummation of the birth that will change everything and the consummation of all that we still await.**

You’d think the church would celebrate its new year with joy and great festivities—after all, that’s how we do January 1st. But that’s not at all what lies before us this morning. In fact, all the lessons contemplate a much darker reality. **Isaiah** speaks of a longing for **God to tear open the heavens and come down, a longing for quaking mountains that would indicate that God is indeed present. Trembling nations** would be just fine because *at least* that would indicate that God has not left the building, so to speak. **Isaiah** contemplates a **God who is angry and has withdrawn divine affection** because humanity has utterly blown it. Not a happy thought, eh. But honestly, looking around at the disarray of our world, it’s not hard to see *why* **Isaiah** might think such a thing. Sometimes, it feels as though God has left us to our own devices and has utterly **withdrawn** from our day to day reality. Some days, we might join **Isaiah** in our longing for God’s presence to be made known even if it came with a good dose of **rending, quaking, and trembling.**

Then the **psalmist** picks up where **Isaiah** leaves off, again speaking of **an angry, almost spiteful God who has gone into hiding, who is feeding his people bowls of tears and who has made them the derision of their neighbors and a laughingstock of their enemies.** The **psalmist** begs **God to restore them, to show the light of God’s countenance, so that they may be made whole.** So much for a celebration to mark this new beginning—so far, all we’ve got is **withdrawn, angry, hidden God.**

Come on gospel, give us some good news! And **Jesus said, “In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”** Great—**darkened sun, moon that sheds no light, stars that fall from heaven.** That’s *bleak*. And *dark*.

Bleak, dark, apocalyptic, cataclysmic pictures of our world. And where is God in the midst of this chaotic mess? According to these images, either **angry and causing it** or **hidden and removed.** No real room here for those little things you blow on that roll out and announce Happy New Year with sweetness and light.

No, **Advent announces the world is a hot mess, and it’s into THIS world that God is coming.** And so, we name the dark, even the scary dark. We name the *dark of depression*; we name the *dark of loss*; we name the *dark of illness*; we name the *dark of uncertainty*; we name the *dark of unfulfilled dreams*; we name the *dark of flying leaps into the great unknown.* We name the truth that we often *feel powerless* and things definitely *feel out of control.* We name that our world is **shaking at the foundations**, and we are not at all sure how all this will indeed shake out. But though **Isaiah thought God was angry and withdrawn**, though the **psalmist believed God was hidden**, though **Jesus contemplated a time when it would all go really dark, today,** I’m going with the gem that

Paul gives us—“*you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*”

God *isn't* angry, or **withdrawn**, or **hidden**; *God is faithful*. God has called us into **fellowship with one another and with Jesus**. God has **given us every spiritual gift** we need **as we wait** in these times **to see how and where Jesus will be revealed**. God will **strengthen us all the way to the end**, and that kind of *persevering spirit* is a gift in these days. *We have everything we need* to move into the heart of this **Advent season**.

And while we're at it, *I want to give a shout out for the dark*. The dark can be scary, but *the dark can also be full of life in the hidden places. The stars need the dark* to be the canvas that gives brilliance to those millions of points of light. Too much light, and you can't see the majesty of the light that travels the universe to fill us with awe and wonder. And there's the *dark of the earth where roots grow deep* in the hidden places that sustain all the life above the ground. And as we contemplate the birth of the Holy One, we do well to remember *the dark of the womb* that grows life slowly over time.

The dark indicates that something is shaking loose, and something is being made new. Something is falling apart, and something is being illuminated. Something is dying, and something is pregnant with possibility.

Advent invites us into the dark, but does so with a deep trust that all this is heading somewhere lifegiving. A birth is imminent—God will be born in these torn and chaotic times. *God is coming, and God is always coming again.*

Even when it feels like the end of the world, we have every reason to hope.

So, don't be afraid of the dark. Take this season to acquaint yourselves with its contours. Search out what is **gestating in your life**. Look for signs of **God coming in power and glory, even amidst all that is ending**. Jesus' last words of counsel today are, “**Keep awake...What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.**” **Keep awake** to all that is moving and changing and growing. **Keep awake** to your deepest longing to **see God and feel God's presence**. Let your eyes *adjust to the dark* and *grow your trust* that something beautiful is at work within you *and* within our world.

Light will come again, and soon enough; **the star** will draw us, far and near, to **Bethlehem**, but *it won't be able to guide us there without the dark*.

All this **shaking apart**, all this **trembling**, all this **yearning** and **longing**, these are the **birthpangs**—*God has made a decision—you and I and this crazy creation are worth it. God is coming*, and we have every reason to be filled with **hope**. Amen.

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December 3, 2017