

Advent1 Reflection (29Nov2020)
Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80; Mark 13:24-37

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake, the nations tremble at your presence!”

So starts the hope and expectation of this season of Advent, scripturally, words from the prophet Isaiah to launch us into it.

With that sense of launch, I happened to be watching the launch of the SpaceX rocket with Starlink satellites the other night between meetings.* It serves as a decent image, even in reverse direction of tearing open the heavens from what Isaiah depicted. The rocket sped to 150 mph in less than 20 seconds, 27 seconds to get a mile up into the sky, and at a minute was going almost 700 mph at 5 miles above the surface, and it only accelerated from there.

If Isaiah gets what he wants, are we expecting the season of Advent to launch with that big of a bang, a sonic boom to make the mountains quake and nations tremble? The term Advent means “coming.” Is this about God’s presence bursting into our lives, rocketing into your orbit? If Jesus is coming, what are we watching for? What is the anticipated Advent? Where do you look for the presence or the arrival of God?

In this year’s first passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus names cosmic phenomena: dark sun, new moon, falling stars. Like the shuttle launch, such astronomical events surely draw attention. Jesus goes on to lower his gaze to the clouds, and then down to a tree.

So are these signs of the season to spot?

It raises the further question: why do we look for God to show up? What do we want? Do we resonate with the voice of the Psalm: let your face shine on us so we may be saved?

What would we anticipate it means to be saved? Where do your thoughts go with that in these days? Is being saved the same as staying safe? Is it with news about vaccines? Is it looking toward politicians who will arrive to save the day?

Where do you think God is in that? Where do you want God to be?

It’s probably safe to say you want God to show up and make a noticeable difference, a measurable change. When your stress level is skyrocketing, you might long for a God launching to come save you at the speed of light. When days are lonely and grim, you may wish for a celebrated arrival.

Isaiah follows up his initial longing pointing not to something yet to come, but that had already come, saying God “did awesome deeds we did not expect.”

Something we did not expect.

If Isaiah expects God to tear open the heavens and come down, then what about the God who does what we did not expect? “Lo! He comes with clouds descending,” goes one hymn in the end times section of our hymnal. Do we want a rocket re-entry Jesus in a flash of light, full of power, touching down to earth as the smoke clears around him?

Something we did not expect.

We mostly think about Advent and the coming of Jesus as getting ready for his birth at Christmas. But the start of the season here points to something else, at the other end of his life.

Now, I’m pretty reticent to talk about the Second Coming. In fact, we can almost be embarrassed about it. Maybe that’s because we make it so uncertain. For trying to decode all the signs, Christians have long been fooled and foolish in predictions. Jesus himself can even seem wrong—he said he’d be right back, but has apparently dawdled for a couple millennia with no end in sight.

But maybe our sights are set wrong. We’re looking for something we want, but not alert for a God who did something we did not expect.

In both dramatic and everyday terms, Jesus points not to some distant and phenomenal event that seems like it may never happen, but to the very present ways he was acting and what he was accomplishing. It’s hard to hear it all when we get just a few verses, but these echo other parts of the Gospel of Mark.

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J442-ti-Dhg&feature=youtu.be>

When Jesus talks about leaves on a fig tree, it hearkens back to the fig tree he encountered when he cleansed the temple, overturning the dominant and dominating system that allowed the religious authorities to profit by injustice.

And when Jesus portrays stars falling, he's talking about the usual order, the status quo of the authorities. He's saying that the highest thing that could never seem to be shaken will come crashing down: the empire will fall, the emperor be undone.

So to do that will rocket Jesus come like a nuclear missile to make the nations tremble with a violent punishing judgment of descending heavenly armies? No. He accomplished it by doing something we did not expect.

Today's passage points ahead to the end of the story. The repeated instruction to stay awake is what Jesus will repeat to the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. A wakefulness not simply against falling asleep, but in attention to what he was doing—to watch *him*.

That instruction reasonably remains for us. It's not about never taking a nap, about trying to stay always awake. After all, we could only for so long burn our Advent candle at both ends. But we can keep our eyes on Jesus, alert in remembering who and how he was, in this unexpected thing he was doing.

So when Jesus talks about not knowing the time the head of the household will come, those phrases similarly foreshadow final moments around his death. He says “whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows in the early morning or at daybreak.” Evening is when he's betrayed and arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. At midnight, he's put on trial. The rooster crowing points to Peter's infamous denial, awake through the night but wanting a triumphal Lord and not looking to Jesus who suffered, died, and was buried. And Pilate sentenced Jesus to death at daybreak.

Of course, at daybreak on the third day is a different sort of day, a second coming of Jesus. He came right back on Easter dawn in the resurrection.

But that's maybe ahead of the story. Even the cosmic phenomena Jesus mentions point to his

crucifixion, when the sun is darkened. And not only is this against the empire; the created order of things is upended and distinctions of heaven and earth pass away when Jesus cries out “My God, why have you forsaken me,” and the curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom.

That makes torn open heavens old news, but still good news. The harmful status quo is ended (or is ending), the distinctions of who is on top and who on bottom, the powers proven impotent, death becoming life.

If we wanted the God born in a barn to switch to majestic retribution, we're looking the wrong way. So what do you do when death and its forces lose their power? What does it mean to have a God who does this unexpected thing? Where do you look for that coming to you, even today?