

May I speak in the name of the Triune God,
The Love that is stronger than Death.
Amen.

Advent is about time.
It is a time of waiting, of watching, of preparing.
It is a time to get ready for God to come to us.
It is a time to hear strange, sometimes uncomfortable stories of the past,
To long for God in our present,
And to hope for God's coming in our future.

Our reading this morning from the prophet Isaiah is a perfect Advent reading.

First of all, because it's from the past.

Isaiah wrote during the Israelite captivity in Babylon,
A time when the people were cut off from their land,
Their holy places,
Their religion,
And their God.

And Isaiah's desperation seeps through each verse:

O that you would rend the heavens and come down!

Let the mountains quake at your presence!

There is no one who calls on your name,

Because you have hidden your face from us.

You have delivered us into our iniquity.

Isaiah is painting the picture of a people desperate for a sense of God among them,

A people who used to know what it meant to be close to God

And now have no feeling for God's presence.

I wonder:

Do you know how to feel God's presence?

Do you know how to hear God's voice?

Do you feel close to God?

The second reason this Isaiah reading is perfect for Advent

Is because it's so strange.

The mountains quake at your presence.

The fire causes water to boil.

The nations tremble at your presence.

We fade like a leaf.

The wind blows us away.

Our gospel lesson is cut from the same cloth:

The sun will be darkened,

The moon will fail to give light,

The stars will fall from the sky.

They will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds!

He will gather his elect from the four winds,

From the ends of the earth,

From the ends of the heaven.

I wonder.

Do you know what any of that means?

It's Sundays like this,

Readings like this,

That make me glad to be here this morning,

Here being in the Episcopal Church.

See,

I grew up Evangelical,

Not unlike a few of you here this morning.

And these readings would have sounded very different
To my 14 year old ears.

I would have taken these strange readings

These apocalyptic readings,

These vivid word pictures

And tried to interpret them literally,

Or been taught to interpret them literally.

And –

2017 as the year of a North American Total Solar Eclipse aside –

I don't know if you've noticed,

But mountains don't often tremble,

Much less nations;

God's people haven't exactly been gathered up from the four winds,

The stars haven't fallen to earth,

And what even is the end of heaven anyway?

But thanks to Left Behind

I would have been encouraged to imagine

All these strange uncomfortable sayings

As literal predictions of the actual future.

And I was afraid.

Friends,

These strange sayings are not meant to be taken literally.

Not meant to describe with certainty

A definite future bearing down upon us.

That doesn't mean,

However,

That they are comfortable.

Our Gospel reading
Would have been written
During and after the Roman destruction of the temple,
And a first century hearer of these words
Would have been shaken to their core.
They were being cut off from their land,
From their religion,
From their God.
And they would have been desperate,
Desperate for a sense of God among them,
For they were a people who used to know what it meant
To be close to God
But now – temple destroyed - have no feeling for God's presence.

I wonder.
What are we cut off from?
What is it today that keeps us from our religion, from each other,
From feeling God's presence?

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It is a time to get ready for God to come to us.
It is a time to hear strange, uncomfortable stories of the past,
To long for God in our present,
And to hope for God's coming in our future.

There are a few things I miss
From the Evangelical world.
The small groups that met to talk about their faith.
The shared sense of purpose and vision for the world.

But one thing that I have missed most of all –
And that I see most clearly in the music that I miss –
Is the sense of desperation,
Longing
For God.

Any one of us can understand the metaphors,
The exaggeration made in these strange readings.
How many of us hear or watch the news
And feel the nation trembling?
How many of us have to go to school
And wish the sun would stay dark
And that the stars would fall from heaven?
How many consider our friends or our family or our health
And feel the mountains of the earth tremble?

I wonder.
How many of us in those moments long for God?
How many of us need to long for God?

Martin Luther
Said that the greatest idol known to humanity
Is
Comfort. Stability.

We are addicted to stability, to comfort.
Our money, our wealth
- the housing and tax and financial policies and histories –
Often invisible legacies of racialized discriminatory practices

That have enabled us to live with so much wealth
Have cut us off from each other.
They have cut us off from God,
From our need for God.

Our gospel this morning demands that we keep awake.
When the Confirmation youth
Read this gospel two months ago,
In preparation to write this morning's liturgy,
They immediately heard the echo:
Stay Woke.
It's a phrase you've maybe heard:
Stay woke.
An anthem, if you will, for those focused on social justice and inequality.
They started to advocate for an end to white supremacy
To economic inequality,
Saying that we needed to share our wealth with those less fortunate,
With those who do not look like us.
They wanted our Advent 4 reading to become a reality:
That the hungry will be fed,
The humble lifted high,
And that the rich will be sent empty away.

They were longing for God's world.
They were imagining God's future.
The spirit in this generation
Is crying out.
It is longing for God.

The master has gone on a journey,
And he has left the world in our care.

We must stay awake.

We must care for the environment.

We must care for the poor.

We must care for the homeless.

We must care for the alien.

We must care for the widow.

We must stay awake.

We must become awake to God's extraordinary power.

We must share that power,

So generously shared with us,

With everyone:

But especially those who do not look like us,

Who do not talk like us,

And who the powers and favor of this world have cut off.

I wonder.

How can we reconnect ourselves to them?

How can we reconnect to God?

How can we imagine together God's future?

Let us hear these strange and uncomfortable stories from the past.

Let us learn to long for God in this Advent season.

And let us hope,

Imagine, And work

Towards God's future.

Amen.