

Ps 80; Is 64:1-9; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Mk 13:24-37

Watch & Pray – 1st Sun. in Advent 2017

“Howard dies and waits in line for judgment. He notices that some souls go right into heaven, while Satan throws others into a burning pit. But every so often, instead of hurling a poor soul into the fire, the devil tosses one aside. Curious, Howard asks Satan, “Excuse me, but why are you tossing them aside instead of flinging them into hell with the others?”

“They’re from the Western Washington County,” Satan replies. “They’re too wet to burn.” (rd.com)

We meet Isaiah, writing in the 7th c BCE. He appeals to the Creator God to come down and straighten out this mess. Who has not prayed such a prayer? At one point, the prophet says that it has been so long since God’s people have actually called on God’s name, that the Almighty is hiding His face from us.

Though ancient Israel faced different challenges from our nation, there is a similarity between our conditions of life and those of Isaiah’s people. We have come to depend upon massive political

power, rather than seeking justice first. Our prayers have become sacrilegious as we ask for our powerful armies to accomplish international cooperation – meaning to comply with our nation’s demands.

Isaiah reveals the face of our God – disappointed and silent. He portrays a people – his own people – rejecting God’s righteous ways. And, Isaiah is a prophet who called out all peoples – nations and ethnic groups of all religions. He claims the God of Israel is the Creator of all humankind, and that we are one family: humanity. Period. So, this prominent leader of the nation of Israel gives us a lament – weeping and sorrow and supplication – as we begin our Advent journey 2017. Centuries later, the Apostle Paul put it this way:

I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. All of creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal his children. For creation was condemned to lose its purpose, not of its own will, but because God willed it to be so. Yet there was the hope that

creation itself would one day be set free from its slavery to decay and would share the glorious freedom of the children of God. For we know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth. But it is not just creation alone which groans; we who have the Spirit as the first of God's gifts also groan within ourselves as we wait for God to make us his children and set our whole being free. (Ro 8:18-23 GNT)

The Prophet Isaiah mourns for the peoples in bondage to sin and error. By the time of Paul, the miracle had happened: Jesus had given the gift of freedom from sin through His sacrifice, death and resurrection. We live the New Life, but more freedom is headed our way. Complete freedom will **be** when Jesus returns to our world in glory and establishes His kingdom fully on earth. Isaiah was groaning and yearning for the first coming of Messiah Jesus. Our present suffering will end when Messiah Jesus returns to us.

The truth is, we are again watching and praying for the coming Messiah. Counting the days until Christmas underlines our hope for the future. We watch and pray during Advent to prepare ourselves for that day when He appears. One thing we must ponder is the absolute justice of our God – balanced with His absolute mercy. The Prophet Isaiah speaks of both.

We are called to watch and pray – not in bitter isolation, but in the fellowship of God’s only Son, Jesus Christ. Paul begins this letter to the church at Corinth with a great blessing: “Grace and peace from God.” He reminds the Corinthians – and us – that we are waiting for the “revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (v 7). The Apostle John wrote to the churches: “We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” (1 Jn 3:2-3)

Abundant grace exists in the church. This grace is a huge gift. We do not always acknowledge how great is the work of grace. We often think of it as

God's forgiveness. So it is. Then, after God has transformed us by the calling, the justification and the cleansing, God puts us to use allowing the gifts and abilities and opportunities to abound in the community around us. The power of God's goodness is poured out in the ways we relate to our neighbors – near and far. This we see happening as we watch and pray.

Mark is the Gospel writer who gets up in your face. With him, everything happens “suddenly” and decisively. Most of us don't need an extra sense of urgency. Mark says, “Beware, keep alert...” Well, most of us have been in the pressure cooker since Thanksgiving preparations. Our calendars are full. It won't slow down (unless we purposely make time and step aside) – it will build until we collapse right after Christmas. Some of us will collapse with exhaustion. I pray you will be well during these weeks – and at peace. You need your strength.

What the Apostle Mark is giving us is another view of the day – the hour when our Messiah Jesus appears – not as a tiny, helpless baby – but

as Lord of the universe – Ruler of heaven and earth. He reminds us that no one but God knows when that day will arrive. It could be any minute now: “in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow or at dawn.” (Mk 13:35)

Jesus’ first coming was a surprise birthday party. An unusual assortment of guests showed up to celebrate: angels, shepherds, Gentiles from the east. We know Christmas will arrive – according to the calendar with the 25th printed in red.

But, there is a big difference in waiting for Christmas Day and waiting for Jesus Christ. There needs to be real expectant watchfulness if we are waiting for Jesus to show up. You may stand at the Tri-Met stop and passively wait for the bus or train. But, when you are on a street corner and you hear the parade headed your way, you are waiting to see the first drum major. You are on tiptoe straining to see. You are actively watching and waiting.

Watch and pray – in the Advent Season. In every season, keep awake to His coming. Amen