

First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2020, Daniel Garner Tate
Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37, Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you,
O LORD, our rock and our redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means appearance, arrival, or coming. It also means beginning, since Advent is the start of the church liturgical new year. When I think of beginnings, and arrivals, I think of excitement and anticipation, and maybe happiness or joy. But when I first read today's scriptures, I thought more of endings, darkness, and depression.

Today's gospel from Mark is referred to by some commentators as the little apocalypse. Jesus is prophesying the end times, and after his death, resurrection, and ascension, his return. "The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give it's light, the stars will fall from heaven, and the heavens will be shaken. The Son of Man will come in clouds, and the angels will gather God's elect from ends of earth and of heaven."

Our reading from Isaiah is apocalyptic sounding too. The prophet seems to be begging God to end things or at least shake things up, because of Israel's enemies. "Tear open the heavens, make the mountains quake, and the waters to boil. Make the nations tremble." But our passage from Isaiah is also a lament and so is our Psalms reading.

To lament is to express sorrow or regret or grief about a great loss. Something terrible happened that has touched our souls and it is so traumatic that it is almost impossible to hide. There is a formal pattern to many of the laments found in the Bible: There is an expression of the anguish of the current situation, then a cry for deliverance, remembering that God is good, and then a statement of trust and gratitude for God. A lament, a cry to God, is an act of faith, even if there might be some anger in it. There is belief in it, because the prayer is directed to God, even if God seems silent.

The reading from Isaiah is part of a long pouring out of grief that takes up two chapters. Isaiah is begging God to forgive the people because they've sinned, and they've forgotten God. "You God are angry, we are unclean, we fade away, you hide from us." He is saying, "Where are you God?"

The same is true in our Psalms reading. It too is a lament, a great expression of grief, a plea for help. "Come save us, restore us, how long will you be angry. You feed us the bread of tears. Our enemies laugh at us. Give us back our lives. We call on you!" Again, where are you God! Where is the hope in this? Where is the anticipation? Where is the excitement? It's more like dread.

But, these scriptures applicable to our present. This year, 2020, might be the most difficult some of us have ever experienced. People are dying and being crippled by a virus at that is now running unrestrained across the world. We don't get to hug or comfort each other for fear of its' transmission. Hospitals are being overrun. People are losing jobs again. Support from the government is running out. For years our democratic institutions have been undermined from within. All summer, smoke from fires poisoned our air. The West Coast had the worst air pollution in the world. There were days when the sun was blotted out. One could say without

exaggerating, that the times we are living in, are apocalyptic. We try to go about our lives as if everything is normal. We try to make things as normal as we can. But, many of us are exhausted. These are not normal times. I forget that. I get hard on myself for not being better, stronger. I miss deadlines and have to keep asking for more time. I've missed appointments. I've made mistakes. I haven't done everything I've said I'm going to do. Sometimes I pray and ask, when is it going to stop God? I can't keep doing this all by myself. Where are you? Just like our scriptures are asking.

There is in these scriptures an accusation as well. Isaiah is angry at his people, but he also angry at God. He says, "You have hidden your face from us! You have delivered us into the hand our iniquity." Earlier in the chapter before our reading he says "Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me. Why oh Lord do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?" (Isaiah 63:15, 17) Isaiah blames God. Isaiah questions God's goodness. He questions if God is really God.

But the Psalmist and Isaiah are giving us a pattern of prayer that we can follow. They are lamenting and grieving for their people. These are prayers begging God to intervene. These words of scripture are giving a communal voice to the people. Breaking the silence and speaking reality are the way out of despair. It would be easy to give up. Job, in his despair says, "I will speak in the anguish of my spirit." (Job 7:11)

We can do this too. It is hard to believe, but lamenting helps. Grief is a gift. So is speech. We are living in a new reality, and as difficult as this is to accept, we have to, if we want move on. Things won't be the same after the pandemic is over. Acknowledging our grief and our losses and the changes coming, gives us strength to move forward. We cannot deny our pain.

It's alright to be angry and honest with God and even blame God. All prayer counts. All requests are valid. Isaiah says, "You did awesome deeds that we did not expect." God has done great things for me in my past, so why should I doubt that God will do the same for me now and in the future, and the same for all of us here, and in the world.

At the same time, we do need to give up, to let go. I can't do anything without God's help. I didn't make myself. It is a mystery why I keep breathing, why my heart keeps beating. The prophet says, "O Lord, you are our father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand." We can do nothing without God. God made us in our mother's wombs, God remakes us each day that we live.

We need to speak our fears both to God and to each other. There is hope in these scriptures and hope for us. Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." He says to keep awake. Be present. Look. Be aware. Listen for God's guidance. Isaiah says, God, "you meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways."

There is hope in these scriptures and there is hope for us. Despite our current situation, vaccines to break the virus are on the way. It would be nice if it were raining in this season when it is supposed to be raining, but the air is clear right now, and the fires have died down. A new administration is taking over in January. Sometimes we have to go through hell to get to heaven.

Still, these are not normal times. I need to be generous and forgive myself. I can't do it all myself. I need to ask for help. I need to get enough rest. Things don't have to be perfect, even though I might want them to be. I need to be grateful for what I have.

Three days ago, it was Thanksgiving Day. Paul says in our epistle, "Grace to you and peace from God, our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you." We are to give thanks even as we lament, even in our grief. I love these sentences from Paul. In addition to giving thanks for the Corinthians, he is also blessing them. This is something we can do for each other.

The Advent season marks the beginning of the liturgical year of the Christian church and is a time of waiting and preparation for both the celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas and his return at the Second Coming. This is not as unusual as we think, this waiting for the Second Coming, and the waiting for birth of Jesus. We do this with our loved ones, with our own lives every day. None of us knows how long we or our loved ones will live. It is easy to be lulled into the illusion that each of us will live long lives and die natural deaths, but this is not always the case. If we really love ourselves and each other, we keep awake, we pay attention to each other as much as we can. We can do the same thing when thinking about the Messiah coming again.

Let us lament and grieve our losses but let us also anticipate the second coming, and our celebration of the birth of Jesus, and let us give thanks and bless each other. Life is short. I'll end with a blessing familiar to us here at St. Ambrose. "Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us. So be quick to love and make haste to be kind. And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you, and remain with you forever. Amen." And now, hear the reading of the scriptures.