

**Keep Awake!**  
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**Isaiah 64:1-9**

- <sup>1</sup> O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—  
<sup>2</sup> as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!  
<sup>3</sup> When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
<sup>4</sup> From ages past no one has heard,  
no ear has perceived,  
no eye has seen any God besides you,  
who works for those who wait for him.  
<sup>5</sup> You meet those who gladly do right,  
those who remember you in your ways.  
But you were angry, and we sinned;  
because you hid yourself we transgressed.  
<sup>6</sup> We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
<sup>7</sup> There is no one who calls on your name,  
or attempts to take hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.  
<sup>8</sup> Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
<sup>9</sup> Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,  
and do not remember iniquity forever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.

**Mark 13:24-37**

- <sup>24</sup>“But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
<sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.  
<sup>26</sup>Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup>Then he will send  
out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.  
<sup>28</sup>“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves,  
you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is  
near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have  
taken place. <sup>31</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>32</sup>“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup>Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup>It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup>Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup>or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup>And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

As we enter this season of Advent, we begin somewhat strangely with the prophet Isaiah’s lament that God is not with the Israelites. Not even a hint of the coming Savior child. The words of the prophet Isaiah are to and for a people in exile. First, a little background: written and compiled over several centuries, beginning with prophecies from Isaiah, son of Amoz, the book of Isaiah is “a cumulative series of interpretations that reapplied and expanded older parts of Isaiah to meet the needs of the later periods and situations.”<sup>1</sup> Last week I mentioned those kings who made bad alliances on behalf of the Israelites. There were problems with the kings even before the bad alliances. Because of disagreements and different understandings, the Promised Land split into two kingdoms, Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Each kingdom had their own kings, making their own bad decisions. Isaiah, for whom the book is named, prophesied (prophe-sighed) in the Southern Kingdom under four different kings, beginning in the eighth century BCE, or Before Common Era, once described as BC.

The third of the four kings, in an effort to protect his kingdom of Judah, made an alliance with the Empire du jour, Assyria; that alliance made Judah a vassal, something the fourth king did not like. He revolted against the Assyrian king without success. As Assyrian power waned, the Babylonian Empire was on the rise. In the time after Isaiah there was one last king of Judah and he rebelled against this new power, Babylon, only to have the temple of Jerusalem destroyed and most of his people sent into exile as payback. In time, as is always the case, another empire rose, the Persian Empire, under a benevolent King Cyrus who not only allowed the people to return from exile but encouraged it and encouraged the reestablishment of their culture and their religious center, the temple.

It is believed that our reading from Isaiah today comes from the time of Cyrus but before the temple was rebuilt.<sup>2</sup> After centuries of being shuffled around and split up, the people known as Israel are spoken for by Isaiah. They believe, because of their disobedience, God has hidden from them and they are asking God to come back, to care for them as a potter lovingly handles clay. To them, they are living in a God-less world run by God-less rulers. Things look bleak.

And so we come to our reading in Mark. In our reading, we get the end of chapter; it begins with Jesus talking about the future destruction of that rebuilt temple from Isaiah and battling new empires and

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<sup>1</sup> *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 974 Hebrew Bible.

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 5*, p. 3.

God-less leaders who will make their lives miserable. All of these things will and must happen before the Son of Man comes again. Even with these telltale signs, though, no one can know the exact time when the Son of Man will arrive. Just as other readings in this past month have admonished us, so does this one: don't become complacent! Advent is paradoxical for we wait expectantly for the Christ who has already come and for the same Christ who has not yet come into our world as an infant holy. The reading in Mark reminds us of this: that we also await the same Christ who has not yet come again.

As we wait upon Jesus, both this Christmas season and throughout our lives, we must wait expectantly. Not the way one waits for a bus. No. The way a child waits for a birthday, the way a parent awaits the return of a student from college, the way a partner waits for his love. In such expectation, we are active, making lists of desired presents, buying favorite foods, planning something special. But we've heard this story before, of the star and the manger and the young couple greeted by shepherds and kings. In fact, the story comes around routinely, just as scheduled buses do. There are no surprises and the excitement has worn off. The same happened for those who lived in the decades after Christ's resurrection; at first, they were certain that Christ's coming again, or parousia, was imminent. As first followers began to die off, their hopes for themselves being alive to witness the coming again in their lifetime faded, and so their excitement for something they would not see faded, too.

How then shall we, centuries removed, think to muster a hopeful and active expectation? How do we receive the Christ child with wonder? How do we prepare excitedly for his coming, rather than preparing excitedly for Christmas? We can begin by trying to imagine our lives without Christ.

What assurances would not be there?

Where in your life would peace be missing?

How would you look toward death?

In light of that, how would you go through life?

And now, remember that Christ did come and is coming for you and for me and for all God's children. You know what changes the birth of this child will signal - what joy that brings! There is already so much we have been given through the coming of Christ. When we reflect on that, how can we not be excited by what his upcoming birth brings?

But what about Christ's coming again? Theologian Martin B. Copenhaver shows us what joyful expectation is to be had in awaiting the parousia: "Already Jesus has established the means through which we are drawn into relationship with God, but not yet do we live in complete communion with God. Already the realm of God is evident, but not yet is that realm fully established."<sup>3</sup> It gets better! So let us prepare excitedly, let us stay awake and alert to both his presence and his return, for we do not

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<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 5*, p. 25.

know when he will come again.

In the same way, the Israelites were waiting upon a God who was already among them. If we were to read into the chapter after today's reading, we would hear God's reply to Isaiah's lament. "I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name." Let us learn from our ancestors, not focusing on where God does not seem to be; let us seek God in our midst and at all times. Martin Copenhaver says, "By keeping alert and awake, by living our lives in accord with the One who has already come, died, and been raised, not only will we be prepared to live in the promised realm of God when it comes, but we may experience even now some of what life in the realm will be like."<sup>4</sup> Make the most of the wait!

Let us pray: God who was and who is and who will be, create in us hearts filled with excitement about the coming of your Son, once and again. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.