

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent  
Sermon 12.3.23

**Isaiah 64:1-9**

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—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! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 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. 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. 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. 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. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

**Mark 13:24-37**

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. 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. 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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 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. 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (513)

Here we begin, and with a look to the end—or if not *the* end, then *an* end. Society is falling apart. The very cosmos are falling apart.

These things must happen.

It might strike you as strange. It might not be what you expected—a look to the end, rather than to that long ago beginning. A baby! A newborn baby.

Here we begin, this new church year. This, the first Sunday. This, also the first Sunday of a new church season, Advent, the season that prepares us for Christmas, the holiday marking that long ago moment that was the birth of it all.

And it all though begins with a look to the end—or if not *the* end, then at least *an* end. Israel has fallen to Babylon. Rome is crushing the whole known world. Things fall apart even to this day. Hope seems crushed. The given way is taken away.

Advent begins—and we look to the future at a time when we might tend more to look to the past, even, especially the gauzy, sentimentalized past.

There's this strong pull during this time of year, which we colloquially call the Christmas season, even though the Church year wouldn't have us in Christmas season until December 25<sup>th</sup> and then only through to January 6<sup>th</sup>—a short season, the shortest. There's this strong pull. Christmas has become a nostalgic holiday, a nostalgic season.

This isn't a recent trend. It was so during my childhood, now forty years ago.

I loved getting the house decorated for Christmas. I really did look forward to it all year long. And then the day would come, and we'd get them out, and I realized a few years ago what I remember now every year, that so much of the décor were depictions of times past—simpler times, maybe even times of slight yet sweet deprivation. A little village snow scene with wooden people and houses and fences and dogs that I could rearrange on the living room side table. A couple of snow globes with whatever sentimentalized scenario those tend to contain. A puzzle with scenes from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, poor, sick Tiny Tim, miserly Scrooge, disruptive ghosts invading cramped, drafty rooms (though the ghosts of the past and present not nearly as frightening as the ghost of the future. Why is the future so frightening?!) We'd even sometimes read aloud Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory*, or more frequently watch the movie version of it, which looks back at Capote's rather lonely childhood in the 1940s.

It's a holiday swathed in nostalgia.

It makes me think of a song, though not a Christmas song. Suzanne Vega's "Last Year's Troubles."

*"Last year's troubles are so old fashioned:  
The robber on the highway, the pirate on the seas.  
Maybe it's the clothing that's so entertaining:  
The earrings and swashbuckling blouses that please.*

*Look at all the waifs of Dickensian England:  
why is it their suffering is more picturesque?  
Must be 'cuz their rags are so very Victorian.  
The ones here at home just don't give it their best.*

*Last year's troubles: they shine up so pretty  
They gleam with a luster they don't have today*

*Here it's just dirty and violent and troubling  
Et cetera. (Last year's troubles)*

*But trouble is still trouble and evil still evil  
Sometimes we wonder, is there more now, or less?  
If we had a tool or could tally the handfuls,  
Measure for measure, it's the same, would be my guess.*

For what it's worth, that would be my guess, too. Last year's troubles are as daunting as next year's troubles. It's just that last year's troubles are already known to us. Next year's are yet a mystery. Of course, we can make some pretty good estimates. We can prognosticate, read the signs of the times and game them out into the future, figure how they'll look in a year, or in ten. But ultimately, they're unknown to us.

We don't know what's going to happen. There's a haunting in that. There's hope in that. Watch! Keep watch. Stay woke.

It's a lot easier to consider last year's troubles, last century's troubles. We made it through them, we know—or enough of us did that we're here now. They seem quaint, even, those troubles, in retrospect.

Is this behind the drive to make Christmas a thing of nostalgia? That it removes the imperative Christmas puts upon the future? That it removes the dread that also comes with Christmas, that God is about to come among us, and that that will change *everything*?

This is the promise of Mark's gospel.

This is the threat of Mark's gospel.

With a new church year, we get a new gospel narrative to follow. We just finished Year A, which has us follow the Gospel of Matthew. We're embarking on Year B, which has us follow the Gospel of Mark.

We'll depart from it a lot too. Mark's gospel is short, the shortest of them all. And it doesn't include a lot that the other gospel narratives do, namely, for this time of year, any of the nativity stories. According to Mark, the story of Jesus begins when he's an adult. It begins at his baptism, when he's declared to be God's son, the beloved, with whom God is well pleased. For this, we'll join up with other gospels from time to time, to fill in the parts that Mark never got to. (It's widely thought this is the earliest written gospel narrative, making the other two synoptics—Matthew and Luke—a filling out of this earliest frame. John, for what it's worth, is a departure from that frame, but a worthy one.)

As for Mark, as for Mark's brevity, it suggests what seems essential to who Jesus was according to Mark. Jesus was immediate presence. Jesus had immediate effect. The way a candle kindled effects darkness, Jesus shows up and everything changes. He wasn't a teacher, as Matthew understood him to be, communicating a frame of mind that enabled a capacity to live according to the way of God. He wasn't a bearer of burdens, as Luke composed him to be, in Luke's orderly and tarrying account, Jesus whose mission would then be taken up by the apostles as told in Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles. For Mark, the apostles would never have been able to take up Jesus' mission. For Mark, there is only following after him, he who has gone so immediately ahead. Jesus was singular and irreplicable. He could only be followed after. As the manifest presence of God in the world, as the manifestation of the reign of God now come among us, Jesus had immediate effect and he could only be one whose presence we continue to seek out that the world might continue to be touched by God's disruptive good.

I'll tell you this, I love the gospel of Mark. I love Mark's understanding of Jesus, his *conviction* about Jesus. But it's not so easy to preach on because it's not so easy to discern what we're supposed to *do* about him. Other than follow. Other than watch for him, watch for the holy, terrible disruption to the status quo and follow for what good might erupt from such breaks. Every moment, a chance. Every moment an opportunity for vigilant hope.

Mark wrote during a time of disruption, dread disruption; and figured upon a world that would follow with still more disruption, evermore terrible disruption. Really, in Mark's world everything had begun to come apart. The Temple had already fallen (already and again, first when Isaiah was prophesying in 586 BCE, and again with Rome in the year 68.) Jerusalem had already (and again) been sacked. Rome was on war footing, and the Jews were their target, them and also now these Jewish-Christians, these Followers in the Way who were bringing new kink to the usual ill-fit of Jews amidst an empire that required conformity or expulsion, conformity or crucifixion. (Why did the Jews insist on being a nation apart, a people distinct? Just join, already!)

It was all just coming apart.

Like it does every so often as history unfurls.

I keep thinking of the movie *The Graduate*. A great movie, a classic. Have you watched it recently? Released in 1967, it features a recent college graduate who returns home for the summer where he can't quite rally for the life that now lays before him. Enfeebled at the idea of doing what's expected, he seems to think his life is on a conveyor belt, and he's uninterested in taking that predetermined ride. Advised to "go into plastics," the material of the future, it's all laid out

for him and the dread of it is in the dreary *fait accompli* of it all. He's an American. He's white. He's a man. He comes from a certain sort of successful people. "Here is your life. Now go live it and get a house with a finished basement and a pool in the backyard."

I watched it with the kids early in the pandemic.

I don't think they quite got it.

I don't think they could quite relate to dreading a life that is already determined.

We are living in a very different moment. *They*, the young among us, are living in a very different world than the one we might have intended to give them.

There is comfort in this, if you ask our gospel writer. There's comfort in this, because it's at the places of break between the now and the new that Jesus can be felt as having come near. For Mark, Jesus is seen as ever causing disruption. He brings to darkness light simply by showing up. He brings to brokenness restoration simply by coming near. He brings to sickness healing and to suffering joy by virtue of his mere proximity. Watch him! Watch him this year, as we follow in Mark's gospel. Watch that, according to the Gospel of Mark, the status quo is but suffering. For Mark's Jesus, a disruption to the status quo is an opportunity for something heretofore unimaginably good. Which means disruption is itself a sign of Jesus' nearness. The upsetting of things settled and given is a sign of God's presence and urgently calling from where he has gone ahead.

It's an interesting way to read history, don't you think? That the times of *breakdown* are times of *breakthrough*. And it's an energizing way to move into the future—or it can be, depending on how attached you are to the status quo. Is this the best it could possibly be? Is this, what's familiar, also what's good? Or is it just familiar? (We get those things confused sometimes, the familiar and the good.)

Another movie, one I saw more recently. *We Goodmans* went to Gloucester late this summer—and, on one of the days we were there, a storm came and settled its rainy self overhead. I considered what indoor activities we might try. We did the museum, which was impressive. We watched the ocean from our motel porch. Then I proposed a movie: "The Perfect Storm." It takes place out of Gloucester and was filmed in part in the downtown.

A small fishing boat with a crew of five sets out for a final time in a season that had left them poorer for trying. The stakes were high for them. They needed a good haul. But a storm was coming. It was actually three storms, and they were on track to meet violently where the vessel was headed, making it so the crew faced a terrible choice: either to head out past it to wait it out or to

go in early to avoid it altogether. One posed the promise of at least catching some fish while at it. The other promised them a winter of poverty.

They headed into the storm.

Their vessel takes one battering after another. And the time-horizon of their concerns closes in. Suddenly, they're not thinking of the length of their lives or the long winter ahead, or even getting back to Gloucester. Now it's whether, in the next several seconds, they can fix this boom or, in the next next several seconds, they can rescue their one crew mate who was jerked off the boat and now was held to it by one of their very long lines and a hook pierced through his hand. One thing after another. One crisis after another.

Then they get it all back together, and there's this moment of relief, moment of calm. ("It's quiet out there. *Too* quiet.") But then they look out and there's a wall of wave in front of them, coming at them. The small vessel is in a well of calm while coming at them is the worst possible thing, the leviathan of the Bible, an ancient fear, arrived right here.

But all they have to do is crest that wave, crest that wave, get to the raging top edge, before it rolls and crashes in on them.

That's all they have to do. Get to that raging crest.

They power up their meagre vessel and they climb that wave, setting them nearly perpendicular to the earth itself. The wave begins to curl, to roll and tunnel, but they're nearing it, they're nearing that crest, they're nearing the edge, they're almost over it. They're almost on the other side.

(And that we know all this shouldn't suggest to you they returned to the tell the tale.)

I will tell you that much of my life these days has me at this moment, recalling the image of that boat just trying to reach the crest of the wave before the wave crests on them—and all is lost. More pressingly, much of pastoral ministry these days has me in this moment. The churches I serve, these lovely little vessels battered a bit by time but still worthy of further mission, just have to get to the crest of that wave. So many of the churches in our Berkshire Association, so many that I've been aware of in recent years—prayerfully, painfully aware of—just have to get over that wall of a wave, that moving, cresting wall of massive watery weight before it crushes us.

Because we can't go back. There's no going back—back to before the pandemic, back to before our society's turn to fascism, back to before people began leaving the church in droves and largely because the church left them, back to before, back to before. This season of Christmas, its cultural version: it would have us in a month-long practice of pretending it's possible to go back to

before. (“Last year’s troubles.”) But there’s no going back. There’s only going forward, into what could crush us but could also transform us.

It's strange to begin in such a terrible middle of things, to begin so very near to what seems an end. But this season is called Advent for this very reason, “advent” being the beginning of “adventure.”

On the one hand we know exactly how this story goes.

On the other hand, we have but little idea in what world this familiar story will land and play out this time, this time round.

The promise is that in the unknown is an opportunity for God. The promise is that, in the disrupted, is the presence of the Living Christ. He’s not here to bless our familiar but here to usher in the urgent good.

The question is, are we ready for that? Because now’s the time to get ready. Now’s the moment.

Now.

Thanks be to God.