

A SEASON OF ATTENTIVENESS  
Isaiah 64: 1-9; Mark 13: 24-37  
First Sunday of Advent • December 3, 2023  
by Pat Berger

There used to be a billboard that our reading from Isaiah always makes me think of. In big, dark letters it read, "Don't make me come down there." And it was signed, "God." Isaiah, in today's verses that Gina read for us, sounds as if he is imploring God to come down – "tear open the heavens," he asks, "that the mountains would quake at your presence -- . . ." and as we read on, it is clear that it would be ok with him if the people did a little quaking, too.

This sounds like an unusual way to begin the Advent season. We have been in Ordinary Time for 20-some Sundays, since Pentecost; this last Sunday was Reign of Christ Sunday; beginning today we are in a new church year and a new season; and in the lectionary our Gospel readings move from Matthew to Mark. We don't begin at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, as one would think we might; we get to wait for that. Rather, we begin close to the end of the book, close to the end of Jesus' life. And in Isaiah: we don't begin with lines that we all know from Handel's Messiah are appropriate to the season; we begin in the middle of this community lament.

Things have gone badly for those around Isaiah – actually, the people have done more and more badly, and they have begun to think that God has hidden from them. Of course, then, that means they can justify their actions: " . . . because you hid yourself we transgressed," Isaiah says. Sometimes we hear people talking that way now – now and again, we may talk that way. A family member does something or says something that wasn't quite what we had in mind, or maybe not a family member but any other one of God's beloved children does or says something, or maybe a political situation seems a bit weird – you can name your own circumstance that might cause you to say: you know, God could intervene directly here. God could tear open the heavens, and this wouldn't even be a problem. And God

doesn't, and surely then we can say that the result of that is what made me do the wrong thing, too.

Poor God. God is so patient with these divine perpetual children. It doesn't matter what we have done, it doesn't matter what the people Israel had done; still, we are all and they were all God's beloved children. God will be with all of us, always, no matter what. We are in God's heart forever. As we come into this Advent season of the year, what ought that mean for us? If we listen to the words from the writer of the Gospel according to Mark, it would mean that we ought to pay attention. Beware, keep alert, he says. Isaiah called for God to come down, and Jesus says to his listeners that that will indeed happen in the person of the Son of Man. The sun will darken, and no light will come from the moon, and stars will fall – and we are not to know when. So: beware! Keep alert!

How is it that we need to hear this at the beginning of Advent? What is this season about? It really isn't about helping us to mark how many weeks there are for shopping before Christmas. Advent is a time of waiting. It is a time of preparation. It is a time of paying attention. Think about those who were the Hebrew people awaiting the Messiah. It would have been easy for them if they had known that they were waiting for a baby, that this baby would be born on whatever passed for December 25 at that time, that there would be angels and kings and – well, all of that. But they did not know any of that. And even if they had known: they still had to wait for him to grow up! However: all they knew was that they had been promised a Messiah, that God keeps promises, and so a Messiah there would be. So: they waited. They watched. And there were many messiahs, who came through their lives – none of them The Messiah, but all with fancy claims. Sooner usually rather than later, the false messiahs would fall off. And the people continued to wait.

It is very clear that Jesus didn't have in mind that his listeners, then or now, would know when he would return. He hoped that they – and that we – would live as if his return might be right around the corner. We are to be attentive to his influence around us, every day. Unlike

the people who waited for Jesus before his birth, we know what it is – who it is – that we are expecting. Commentator Karoline Lewis writes,

“The incredible event for which we wait, of course, is our God who has chosen to enter into all that decays, into all that will die, and to know it with us. We find God in everything it means to be human, even in death. No longer will God remain in the heavens or behind a curtain high up on a hill. God becomes us, to bring life to that which would surely die and to bring a new heaven and a new earth to the moments when the sufferings and despair of our earthly life is more than we can bear. Advent gives us the time and space once again to believe in and live out this reality.”

This Advent season, let us be attentive to the reality of the season. It isn't that we ought not plan and prepare and party and shop and bake; rather, let's allow ourselves some space, some quiet to remember and be faithful to the fact that we, all of everybody, are the beloved children of the God who came down and the God who will come again, and we are in that God's heart always. See what that means for how you see God, how you see Jesus, in our midst, every day.

Let us pray.