

Wait, Watch, Hope
Isaiah 64: 1-9; March 13: 24-37
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A few days ago a Facebook posting entitled "AFTER THE PANDEMIC", caught my attention. The writer of the posting said: "We are all tired and stressed nowadays from the wear-and-tear of social distancing. On a more hopeful note, here at Thanksgiving: what are you dreaming of doing when the pandemic is over? Feel free to add a comment."

In response people left comments, sharing their post-pandemic dreams of: *"resuming Sunday lunches with mom; gathering with friends; traveling for vacation; going to live concerts and theater; not wearing masks; seeing faces without masks; hugging family and friends; eating in restaurants and gathering to sing in church."*

Today begins the season of Advent, a season of waiting, watching; hoping and dreaming. We have chosen "*Those Who Dream*" as our Westminster Advent theme for this year. It comes from the opening line of one of this year's Advent lectionary scriptures, Psalm 126, that says: "*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.*"

This has been a tumultuous year that has revealed just how vulnerable, and fragile we are as a people. The harsh realities of the pandemic, a national awakening to racial inequities, protests over systemic racism, and our deep national divisions have made it clear that we need God's help if we are to find our way forward and if new possibilities and realities are to be revealed to us. "*Those who dream* do not fall asleep to the harsh realities that the world faces. Rather, God prompts them to be alert to where God's dreams for change and new life are emerging."¹

The Isaiah and Mark texts for this first Sunday in Advent are texts of lament and apocalypse. They seem especially poignant for 2020, a year that has felt oppressive and apocalyptic. O, how we long to leave the nightmare of this year in the rearview mirror, to be able to celebrate Christmas as we always have with family and friends! Yet, because of the dangers of the pandemic, sadly we must remain apart. Christmas will be very different this year.

"How strange and powerful it is to begin this season of Advent with weeping and lament. The coming of Advent jolts the church out of Ordinary Time with the invasive news that it's time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness."²

Isaiah's lament to God captures the cry of our hearts this Advent: "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!*" Isaiah names the anguish of God's perceived

distance from a people in exile. Isaiah gives voice to our longing for God to show up in our desperation and do something, to rescue and restore us from all that threatens.

At the heart of lament is the perceived absence of God. If there is ever a time to lament it is when we no longer feel God's presence. Crying out and questioning God is an act of faith that declares our dependence on God and our hope that God will change things and right injustices.

We lament in order to hope. As we lament, we keep watch for what is coming. The season of Advent comes from the Latin *adventus* - "coming". In Advent we look forward to the second coming of Christ in power and glory as much, if not more, than the first coming of Jesus in the flesh of the Christ child born in Bethlehem.

Today's Mark's passage is known as the "Little Apocalypse". Apocalypse in Greek means, "revelation" – an unveiling of things not previously known. Jesus reveals that God will at some point come to right all wrongs and restore creation. This Mark text is certainly a reference to Jesus' second coming for which we wait.

But, there is even more being revealed here. Jesus is just days from his crucifixion when he tells his disciples: *'you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn . . . Keep awake!'* Evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn- parallel the passion scenes that will soon unfold."³

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus addresses disciples then and now who live in the challenging meantime, between the 'already' of the cross of our salvation and the 'not yet-ness' of God's kingdom fully come on earth as in heaven. Though we are enduring challenging times, the coming of God's kingdom is closer than we realize.

We can see God's future is breaking into the present moment through gestures of compassion, through cries for justice, through deeds of sacrifice and service. If we stay awake, and watch we will see signs that God has and continues to tear open the heavens to come among us in Jesus in mysterious ways.

The last Christmas I remember being this different was in 1983. My husband and I were pastors in a congregation in the small community of Enumclaw, nestled at the edge of the foothills of the Cascade Mountains leading to Mount Rainier. That year Christmas was on a Sunday, and on Friday a windstorm began that would set records.

The town sat at the boundary between two colliding weather systems that became the great Christmas Eve Storm of 1983. With air temperatures near zero- sustained winds of 75mph raged for more than 18 hours, with gusts occasionally nearing 150 mph. Trees were toppled, roof shingles torn off, power was lost and pipes froze as on Christmas Eve we huddled in a friend's basement by a wood stove.

By Christmas morning the wind stopped. It was eerily quiet again and the cleanup began. Miraculously, no one was killed or seriously injured in the storm. But our Christmas plans were in shambles.

I have a vivid memory of one of our church elders, Garrett Van Beek, at our session retreat a month after the storm. Garrett owned a large dairy farm. He and his family were away on vacation when the storm hit. They rushed home early to find their enormous hay and cattle barn destroyed. Within a few weeks, friends and neighbors in the church and community came alongside to help Garrett rebuild.

As we sat in a circle at the retreat, elders shared faith reflections. When Garrett's turn came, on the edge of tears and through quivering lips he said, *I don't understand God. He sends a storm to knock down my barn. Then he sends friends to help me build a new one.*

Advent takes our hard questions seriously. It doesn't try to explain them away with trite answers. Advent opens up space for us to hold the paradox of our lament in tension with Christ's hope and promise *"that we will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."*

As we light the Advent candle of hope, let us keep awake by dreaming, by envisioning how we will live out God's promise to be with us and meet us on the other side of this year of pandemic and protest. "Let us stay awake by living in accord with the One who has already come, died and been raised for us and who will come again. And in so doing, experience even now some of what life will hold in the coming fullness of God's realm."⁴

My hope and prayer as we journey together through Advent is that we will not only dream of a better world, but that God will use us to bring it into existence through the choices we make, the actions we take and the faith we put into practice.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Guide developed by Lisle Gwynn Garrity/ Commentary on Mark 13:24-37 / by guest contributor Dr. Marcia Y. Riggs / A Sanctified Art LLC / sanctifiedart.org
2. Patricia E. De Jong. Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1.
3. David Lose, "In the Meantime"
<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=wm&ogbl#inbox/FMfcgwxwKjdqljVnwXRNZMDFHZqdfKwZC>
4. Martin B. Copenhagen Feasting on the Word- Year B, Volume 1