

“Awake to Hope”
December 3, 2023, Advent I
Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

We don’t hear readings like this one from Mark very often in worship. It sounds pretty dire: the sun going dark, the moon giving no light, the stars falling from heaven. In other words, the fabric of the universe will unravel. This kind of language is extreme, to say the least. And it doesn’t come up very often in the Bible. We get a taste of it here in Mark’s gospel; this chapter is often called “the little apocalypse.” Apocalypse was a way of talking about the world when everything seems to be falling apart. For Christians it’s usually associated with the second coming of Jesus.

When events in the world careen out of control it can feel as though the universe is collapsing and all hope is lost. Apocalyptic literature is a way of acknowledging that fear while also providing cause for hope. As in this passage, just when everything is coming apart at the seams and falling into darkness, that’s when the “Son of Man” will come with great power and glory to make everything right. The message of apocalypse isn’t meant to instill fear or terror about the future; it’s meant to give comfort. Even in Revelation, the most familiar example of apocalypse, in the end God wins. So no matter how hard things get for the beleaguered Christians under Roman rule, if they stay firm in their faith, they’ll all be okay.

Part of the underlying message in these words is the reality of grief and lament. We can hear that in the words of Isaiah. Faced with the devastation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, the people look to God and cry out in anguish: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” They want God to fix this, to do for them what they cannot do for themselves. They’re tired; they’re overwhelmed. They cannot see how their lives can possibly ever be good again. I think of the people of Ukraine, looking around at their devastated towns and cities after so much punishment from Russian forces. How can they possibly rebuild? Or Israel after the atrocities committed by Hamas and Gaza after the bombings that have left tens of thousands dead and injured and hundreds of thousands homeless. How can any of them even imagine a future in the midst of all that?

Trauma robs us of our capacity to hope. It throws us into a spiral of fear and anxiety, anger and grief. Most of us, thankfully, have never experienced that level of trauma and loss. But it doesn’t take much imagination in the age of social media to put ourselves in others’ shoes and learn their stories. Some of us may not even be able to watch the news anymore because we’re so haunted by the images of people in far-off places going through unimaginably painful ordeals. And when we’re exposed over and over to such hard circumstances, hopelessness can take root in us.

I think the writers of scripture had to address that reality, the reality of hopelessness, all the time. We find it expressed in the psalms through laments directed at God, sometimes about God’s failure to act. We find it in the stories of the Ancient Parents—Abraham, Sarah and Hagar; Isaac and Rebecca; Jacob, Leah and Rachel—all of them faced threats and obstacles that seemed insurmountable and could have drained them of hope. And of course we hear the prophets who

so often saw the people around them failing to embrace God's call by caring for the poor and extending justice to the victimized, and allowing their society to descend into chaos. It's a constant theme of scripture: extracting hope from dire circumstances.

In Isaiah's case the way to do that is to take the relationship between the people and God seriously enough to actually go to God with their grievance, with their demand that God act. This isn't some mealy-mouthed request. In essence Isaiah says to God, "Look! You made us this way, now step in here and fix this!" Sounds pretty rough, but it's rooted in the belief that God hears us and God wants for us what we want. Isaiah goes to God carrying a hope steeped in a history of God acting on their behalf: "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." God is their hope, their only hope, if they're to have any future at all.

When we take that relationship seriously enough to actually call on God to act, then we may hear Jesus' words a little differently. All those scary events he describes, all those signs, are really just metaphors for the turmoil that exists in the world all the time. Our job, even though that turmoil may not affect us directly, is to keep from becoming numb to it but to stay awake to signs of hope in the midst of it. If we believe there is more to this life than we can see, that we are meant for more than the harm and suffering we inflict on one another and our planet, then we have to wake up and become the hope the world needs.

You see, that too is a constant theme of scripture. We tend to think of ourselves as only passive observers of God's activity in the world. But anything God does in this world is done through us. Even the Exodus is meaningless if the people don't cooperate with God's work. We are not merely victims of our circumstances. We have the power to make change in the world, to take control. That doesn't mean there aren't events that leave us shocked and frightened. But how we respond to those circumstances is up to us. That's why we stand against antisemitism and Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia and white supremacy, all these forces of hatred that target certain people because of their religion or ethnicity, their gender identity or skin color. And it's why we welcome refugees and asylum seekers, no matter how they make it across our borders, in the face of calls for deportations and erecting walls.

Even though it may seem like there's nothing we can do to eliminate the forces of hatred and darkness in our society, we have the power to speak and be advocates for those who have no voice. Because no matter what happens, no matter how dire things become, we stand firm with the God of compassion and justice. God tears open the heavens to come down and work through us to bring the world hope. So, we must stay awake to hope. No matter what threatens to undo us, even if the stars start falling from the heavens, we are God's agents for hope. We cannot give in to fear and hatred or hide under the covers and sleep until it's over. God is looking to work through us to make things right. Stay awake! The world needs hope!

Amen