

HARDly Thankful
Sunday Advent 1, Year B
Isaiah 64: 1 – 9; 1 Corinthians 1: 3 – 9; Mark 13: 24 – 37
November 29, 2020

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Since this is the first Sunday of a new Church year and this last week we celebrated Thanksgiving, it has really gotten me to think. Even while Thanksgiving is a secular and not a Christian observance, many of us use that day to give thanks to one another, but even more importantly, we give thanks to our benevolent Heavenly Father.

So, I have thought long and hard, and have listened to other pastors, read some reflections of theologians and people in general. And here is where I'm at.

I am thankful for this year. Every bit of it.

Even having suffered through it, and still feeling some of its effects, I am thankful for COVID-19. Yes, thankful.

Riots and looting. Thankful.

Weird and tumultuous elections. Thankful.

Lockdowns and masks. Thankful.

Deaths in the family...this one is harder. But, thankful.

No, I'm not a glutton for punishment. And, no, this year has not been fun. In fact, it has been challenging, stressful, has caused a great deal of anxiety, depression and burn out. I think want to contact our seminaries and convince them to teach a class on how to be a pastor during a pandemic and serious illness. ☺

I do not like that there have been deaths caused by the disease, property lost due to the riots and looting, friendships, and even families, hurt and torn apart due to the politics of this year.

I don't like that so many are afraid to go to church and receive the gifts of God because it could mean the end of their physical life.

I don't like having to figure out how to do online services and Zoom meetings and studies.

Yet, even with all of that, I am still thankful. I am thankful that it has caused many to wipe the complacency out of their eyes, to stretch their faith, to rise from the slumber as lukewarm, comfortable and complacent Christians.

And, if these things haven't shaken your faith, forced you to fall on your knees, caused you to cry out in pain to your God, then I hope it happens to you soon.

Not because I want you to suffer. I don't want anyone to suffer. Not because I want you to grieve or be sorrowful, either. But, because the time is near.

Our readings today serve to prepare us for that event; the coming of our Lord as both conquering King and righteous Judge. The call of Jesus is the same as it was from the prophets of old; *"Be on guard, keep awake"* (v. 33a).

This morning, Isaiah begins by giving a shout out to the glory and awesomeness of God. But, as he does this, he begins by saying, *"Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence...to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence"* (Is. 64:1, 2b).

"Oh that you would rip open the heavens and enter into our world...". "Oh that you would shred the sky, show up and get our attention...".

Oh, but hasn't He? Is that what this is all about? Is this what this year is all about? Everywhere we turn we see friends and family who are suffering greatly, and we wonder why

God is being so mean and uncaring. Or, maybe you haven't had that thought, but I certainly have. This year has been a living hell. And, I'm tired. Your tired.

But, maybe this isn't God being mean and uncaring. What if this is the lesson Jesus wanted us to learn from the fig tree? That, just as when the branches of the fig tree becomes tender and it begins to put out leaves, we know that the season is changing. When we see the leaves here change colors, we know they will soon fall. We see the signs and we know. Farmers are the best at interpreting the signs of the stars, moon, and other indicators that nature gives for changes in weather. What if the things of this year are a sign of change?

I'm not saying Jesus is coming back soon. But, I'm not saying He isn't, either. The fact is, *"no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father"* (v. 32b).

What if the sign isn't just for a change of seasons, but a sign for a change in us?

Notice what Jesus says, *"Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."* (vs. 35-37).

I am thankful that the events of this year has brought many people back to church who have not been... maybe ever. I am thankful that it has driven others away. It is a sifting of wheat and chaff, separating sheep and goats, finding the faithful and culling the complacent.

Is that a hard thing to say? Yes. It is probably harder to say than it is even to hear.

Nevertheless, the words of the prophets, the apostles, St. John the Baptizer, and our Lord, are often hard to swallow. Just like lifesaving medicine is sometimes painful or bitter, so is the truth of God's work.

"Be on guard, keep awake" (v. 33a).

There is, at least, one other thing that I am thankful for... and it is something that hasn't even happened yet. I am thankful that things will never get back to 'normal'. At least, I hope they don't. I pray that we do not return to the same complacent worship, the weakling faith, and the same old idols. I seriously and strongly pray that we emerge from the trials of this year with contemplative and meaningful worship, a ferocious faith, and an aggressive dependence on our Lord who will come to save us.

If you do not feel the urgency, then I hope the signs keep coming, so that you will wake up and see that your God has been patient and continued to call you, to put these things before you to call you to Himself.

Luther once said there are three things that make a theologian; prayer, meditation and testing. Prayer and meditation prepare us for the testing, and the testing drives us back to prayer and meditation.

This is your place of prayer and meditation. This is the place where we prepare for battle. This is the place where we sharpen our swords, put on our armor, and stand ready for the call of our King.

Yet, this is also the place where we return from the battles that are raging. We receive salve for our wounds, strength for our spirits, and comfort from our fears.

Stay awake, my friends. The signs aren't for His coming, but for us to prepared for when He does come.

"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to

the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:3-9).

Now may the peace that passes all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.