

Date: November 29, 2020 Year B Advent 1

Text: Isaiah 64:1-9 (Primary text), Mark 13:24-37

Title: For What Shall We Dream?

### **Isaiah 64:1-9**

<sup>1</sup>O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

<sup>2</sup>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!

<sup>3</sup>When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

<sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>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.

<sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>8</sup>Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

<sup>9</sup>Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.

### **Can You See Yourself?**

Just last week we talked about the story of Jacob and Esau, two brothers—twins, actually, who by grace as well as their own receptivity, experienced reconciliation and restoration with each other after 20 years of estrangement. Their family story included rivalry, jealousy, parental favoritism, deception and manipulation, impulsivity, and greed.

- **“Can you see yourself in this story?”** I asked you.

Not in the details, necessarily, but in the big picture of seeing them as flawed people and recognizing that, we, too, are flawed and broken people. Like them, we, too can be receptive to God working in us for the sake of reconciliation.

Today’s first reading from Isaiah prompts me to ask you the same question: “Can you see yourself? Can you see yourself in Isaiah’s pleading, in the prophet’s longing for God and for God’s intervention?”

The story behind what the prophet Isaiah is saying is a little bit more obscure or complicated than the rivalry story of Jacob and Esau, so let me help unpack it a bit and I think you'll identify with what the prophet is saying.

## A Plea

Isaiah is addressing the people of Israel at the close of the period of exile in Babylon. It has been about 40 years since Jerusalem was overtaken by the Babylonians. Some Jews were displaced to Babylon while others remained in their homeland.

By the time of what we read here, the Persian king Cyrus had defeated the Babylonians and decreed that the Israelites who were living in exile could return. It was a time of uncertainty and change. And there was tension: threats, divisions, land battles, and power struggles erupted between and among returnees, those who had remained in the land, and those who had settled there from other places.<sup>1</sup>

The opening verse of the passage highlights the sense of frustration and the plea for God's intervention expressed by Isaiah:

- **<sup>1</sup>O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—**

It's a lament or plea—a prayer for help and intervention.

What tone do you hear expressed? Is it disappointment—something like, “God, where are you? We need you. We are longing for your intervention.”

- He prays and asks for a sign of God's presence in ways that would generate respect and recognition from both the children of Israel and God's enemies, who they viewed as their own enemies. They cried out for quaking mountains, burning brushwood, and boiling water.
- They wanted it to be powerful and dramatic, so that others would tremble.

I started the sermon by asking “Can you see yourself? Can you see yourself in Isaiah's pleading, in the prophet's longing for God and for God's intervention?”

Isaiah's cry: “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Isn't that our cry, even if we have a hard time giving it voice? Isaiah's plea to God is simple and blunt: *Show up and do something!* You know, like God used to do when God rescued Israel from Egypt.

**What is our plea? What is our lament?** We find ourselves somewhere around eight months in on a health crisis that we had some expectation would last a matter of weeks—or at least that the intense portion of it would be a matter of weeks.

Don't we long for intervention of some form?

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<sup>1</sup> Persian defeat of the Babylonians in (539 BCE) following the Babylonians conquest in 587 BCE

I was reading this week about a post office in France which receives letters from people around the world writing to Santa Claus or “Pere Noel,” which is French for “Father Christmas.” There is a team of 60 adult “elves” who are reading the letters and responding to as many as 12,000 per day. One-third of all letters mention the COVID virus in some way. Collectively, the letters indicate the impact of COVID on children and family life.<sup>2</sup>

- Alina, age 5, wrote with an adult’s help. She asked in her Santa letter that he please use the front door when he drops in, because the back door is reserved for Grandma and Grandpa to minimize their risk of infection.
- 10-year-old Lola wrote to Father Christmas that she wishes “that my aunt never has cancer again and that this virus no longer exists.”
- One of these adult “elves” summarizes the impact she sees:
  - “The kids have been affected by COVID more than we think. . .
  - “The letters to Father Christmas are a sort of release for them. All this year, they have been in lockdowns, they have been deprived of school, deprived of their grandpas and grandmas. We can tell that the children are putting into words everything they have felt during this period.”
- Adults have written, too:
  - One asked for “a pandemic of love.”
  - A grandparent asked Santa to “say ‘Hi’ to my two grandkids that I won’t be able to see this year because of the health situation.”
- “Your mission will be hard this year,” wrote Anne-Marie, an adult. “You will need to sprinkle stars across the entire world, to calm everyone and revive our childhood souls, so we can dream, at last, and let go.”

### ***Those Who Dream***

Adults can write poignant letters to Santa, too. Did you hear this last one: “. . . revive our childhood souls, so we can dream. . .”

“Those who dream” is our over-arching theme as we follow the Lectionary Scripture readings and walk through these 4 weeks of Advent.

There are a variety of “dreamers” in scripture and different meanings or connotations to the word *dream*. What do we mean to invoke by that word or theme?

What does it look like to live as those who dream? In the coming weeks, we will read and reflect on different “dreamers.” Today we have reflected on the prophet Isaiah in particular. In coming weeks, we’ll read about the dreams of other prophets, the psalmists, John the Baptist, Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, the shepherds and the Magi—they were all dreamers. They received, discovered, and responded to God’s dreams for the world.

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<sup>2</sup> The following vignettes are taken from John Leicester, “In Santa’s mailbag, a peek into children’s pandemic worries, Nov. 26, 2020.” <https://apnews.com/article/pandemics-postal-service-france-coronavirus-pandemic-b6ca8343c7f67aaa4ed9de0915378ddd>

To dream in this sense is to long for a better day. It is the plea of Isaiah in today's text: **“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down. . .”**

To dream is to seek to connect with God or hear God in such a way that you have a sense of God's dreams. In Advent, we step into the mystery and awe of God's dreams and pray they shape our reality.

- This theme is for the dreamers in all of us—those who dream of a deeper connection with God and those who dream of a better world.
- It's for those who dream of comfort and for those who have given up on their dreams.
- It's for those whose dreams have been crushed and for those who show us that dreams take time.

To be a dreamer is to seek and sow God's dreams for our world.

## **To Dream is to Be Active**

The pairing of the Isaiah text with the gospel reading from Mark suggests that we, too, are a part of the outcome of the dream. We, too, participate in working toward that dream.

You've heard me say that repetition in a text is a clue to discover its meaning or theme. Did you pick up on the repeated words or ideas here in Mark?

- Beware (v. 33)
- Keep alert (v. 33)
- Keep awake (v. 35) and (v. 37)

These are all “Pay attention!” kinds of alerts. Waiting is not passive. This is the message of the passage from Mark. It is expectant and hopeful. We are to be awake, be alert. The waiting is to be accompanied by a watchfulness or readiness for action.

Later in the service, you'll see that our Affirmation of Faith includes the phrase

- “We believe that Jesus walked this world to wake us up, inviting us to be the Church in the world.”

Shall we dream together? Shall we long for a better day? Shall we wait for and look for and participate in what God is doing in the world? Shall we look for the ways that God keeps coming in small, vulnerable, unexpected, and unlooked for ways? And shall we be active as dreamers who demonstrate by acts of love that God is present—that God is still at work loving and blessing God's people and world?

Let us be “those who dream.”