

Advent 1B: Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

This time of Advent is filled with contrasting messages. The ticking clock says *hurry up and get ready*. The Advent candles say *slow down so you can be ready*. Just as we start our annual countdown to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25, Advent begins with talk about the second coming of the Son of Man or the Promised One (*Inclusive Bible*). Just as the natural world in the Northern Hemisphere is being lulled to sleep, we are told *keep awake*. Just as the twinkly lights go up and festivities really get going, Jesus mentions suffering. This year, because Advent is beginning as late as possible in the calendar, there's an additional mixed message in that we will be celebrating Advent *and* Christmas on the same day: on Sunday, December 24 in the morning, it's the fourth Sunday in Advent. And then, there will be a quick shift to Christmas Eve happening later that same day. If you sometimes feel overwhelmed by all of these contrasting messages filling the air, you're not alone. There is an inherent tension in this time of Advent.

Time is front and center in the readings, even though they all come from very different times. Stay with me for a moment because the tensions and the mixed messages are about to get even more complicated. First, Isaiah. Isaiah is a long book, several centuries in the making, that basically runs from the mid-8th century BCE to the mid-6th century BCE (back just a little awhile, about 2800 - 2600 years ago). Between the beginning of Isaiah and the very end of Isaiah—and Isaiah 64 is almost at the end—ancient Israel saw the rise of three major empires. In that time, ancient Israel (not to be confused / conflated with modern day Israel) was divided into two kingdoms: the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom.

Psalm 80, the oldest of the readings, comes from the time of the first empire—the Assyrian Empire—when the Northern Kingdom and much of the Southern Kingdom were conquered. The people of God discovered firsthand that kingdoms are in a very league

different from empires, in scope and power. We tend to think of the psalms as stand alone poetry. But the psalmist here is not just having a hard day, a one-time cry. This is a wailing from the depths of how the people in the Northern Kingdom had been forgotten and abandoned by God. They had expected God to be there for them and with good reason. God had always come through in the end, pulling off some wild and unexpected last-minute, save-the-day schemes or miracles. But not this time, not for them. God didn't show up to perform any mighty acts. Even worse than that: there is complete silence on God's part. *Why don't you, God, answer our prayers? Why have you publicly humiliated us and abandoned us? We eat the bread of tears. We drink bowls of tears. The only thing we are left with are our tears.* This is not just a psalm or song of deep suffering. These are cries of complete despair.

For those living in the Southern Kingdom, God does produce a miracle—the miracle of all miracles. Unexpectedly, under the Assyrian onslaught, Jerusalem held—a sign that God was with them, protecting what was most sacred to them, most representative of their long, unbreakable relationship. But then came the rise of the next empire, the Babylonian Empire. Each empire exerts its power in particular ways and this time, there were no more miracles. No baby born to keep the generations going, as had happened with Abraham and Sarah; no mad dash through the Red Sea to liberation, a la Moses and Miriam. Jerusalem fell and with it, the temple was destroyed and immediately everything changed. Leaders were exiled. It is not an exaggeration to say that life as they knew it was ended in one fell swoop: their intellectual, social, political and religious fabric disintegrated. Not only had God not protected them. God had abandoned them.

By the time of Isaiah 64, about 150 years after the psalm, the despair present in the psalm has only grown. Not only has God remained silent, but God is still nowhere to be found. Generations of people knew nothing other than loss, grief, endless battles and suffering. *Where are you, God? Why don't you do something—*

anything—on our behalf anymore? You used to do amazing deeds, but now, you have hidden your face from us. The people living in the time of Isaiah 64 were in the midst of an identity crisis. What does it mean to be the people of God, in relationship with a God who is absent? These are real questions, born of real anguish, that real people asked.

And this is where Advent begins. Not just back then, 2600-2800 years ago. But now, in real places of anguish and despair—real questions, from real people, with real not-seeing God. It is not where any of us might choose for Advent to begin, but it is where Advent begins, with these words from Jesus: *But in those days, after that suffering...they will see the Son of Man coming.* What happens in this moment in Mark is Jesus's acknowledgement that to be human is to know suffering. Sometimes we are the ones experiencing the pain or loss or anguish; sometimes it is our loved ones who are going through something so difficult and we are waiting and watching with them; sometimes the grief is for people and situations on the other side of the world or what is happening in the natural world.

There is tension in this season Advent, but the tension might not be for the reasons we typically associate with this short season (the urgency to accomplish a lot in a few short days; the awareness of frayed relationships, the outer smile we sometimes feel we need to put on our faces, despite what is going on inside our souls). The tension is so much bigger, involving all of creation—the sun, moon, stars, earth, flora, fauna, people. We are all in between *this* time where there is suffering and *that* time Jesus describes, when there will be full healing and wholeness of all. In *this* time, where we despair at what we see and *that* time where we will experience the full reign of God restoring all peace, all justice. We are between this time and that time. Between the Now-and-the-Not-Yet. As we move through Advent, Mary becomes a focal point as the one who bears God in her womb. The Now-and-the-Not-Yet time we are in is a gestation period. Gestation happens down deep. The seed of the fig tree that will grow to produce the tender leaves Jesus refers to needs to be

underground in the soil. It's so revealing that Jesus here does not say, *Look for God*. He just keeps saying, *Be alert. Keep awake*. Other senses, other than these eyes / our usual eyesight, are needed to become attuned to God during this Now-and-the-Not-Yet gestation time. All of our senses are being called to be awakened to this time. To see that God has not forgotten you or your neighbors or creation or anyone, despite how it appears to our eyes. In gestation, we / the world cannot see the face of the One who carries us. But in this time of gestation, this is the time when we are so close to the heartbeat of God. Right next to it. So close during gestation. Become attuned to that heartbeat of the Universe, Jesus seems to be saying, even (or especially) in this time of the Now-and-the-not-Yet. It's right here. Wait. Rest. Grow. Listen. Hope.