

The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Isaiah and Mark are getting into some wild stuff, don't you think?! It's certainly disturbing – as much for us as for their original readers. I'm always tempted to try and explain what we just heard – explain it with rational, objective analysis, with a contextualizing approach that – on some level, anyway – I think will help, will wrap it up in a neat, easily disposable package – to be recycled again next year! Thank you, Enlightenment thought! Thank you, scientific method!

This sort of text is very difficult – probably by intention. It resists that kind of objective exactitude. Grasping passages like this is really an art – but not the sort of art you find in a museum or art gallery. It's street art, spray-painting in a hurry so as not to get caught, knowing that the graffiti's profound meaning quite likely will get white-washed over tomorrow.

It's all very “now” – a message of the moment, for the moment; a message that needs to be given. I believe we need to let the wildness be wild, let the lack of neat wrappings be okay, don't feel the need to supply them.

What about the message in them? Yes, things look pretty dark and messed up, at the moment. God's promise is that “even – perhaps especially – in the darkest of times, I will be with you.”

I think we know that. And I think we're pretty good at hearing the “be alert,” be “on watch” message in today's Gospel. Unfortunately, if we stop there, then we can easily end up in a passive posture where we simply wring our hands at the wildness we see around us at the moment in our nation and our world and say to ourselves “there's nothing I can do.” That way of looking at Advent sees Jesus' as a sort of divine “Mr. Fix it” coming to do some holy cleaning up, while we stand on the sidelines as cheerleaders!

Being “alert” and “on the watch” is only a part of the message in today's gospel. The other part – the first part, in fact – is that we've been “put...in charge, each with [their] own work.” It's only the door-keeper who has the specific charge “to be on the watch.”

In the language of Mark and of Advent, the door-keeper will turn out to be John the Baptist. Today some of us might fit into that “door-keeper” role. But not all of us. So where does that leave us? The clear answer is that we have work to do! Advent says “hold on: help IS on the way” with the expectation that “hold on” and “be on the watch” aren't the same thing! Holding on – getting ready – being prepared – are all active responses, are part of our “own work.”

Waiting is a part of our own work, but only when it's active waiting. We're waiting, not just for Jesus' birth, but for the transformation of our lives and the world. Our faith claims that on all levels of existence, all the time, from the personal to the universal, something is being born in us and we are waiting for its arrival. Advent most obviously focuses on that reality, because:

*“Advent reflects the unfinished nature of creation, the horizon that recedes with each step we take toward it. God brought forth an unfinished universe, requiring our participation*

*in its ongoing history. Jesus the Christ came to earth, healed the sick, shared the vision of Shalom, died, and rose again, and yet his ministry is unfinished, and the world he came to save still reflects the ambiguity of beauty and brokenness, salvation and sickness. Jesus has come and we are still waiting.” (Bruce Epperly).*

Throughout this shortened Advent season we’re reflecting on that waiting and particularly what we hope for, through what are called the “O Antiphons” – they make up the themes of the Advent hymn “O come, O come, Emmanuel.” Those themes are drawn from the Prophet Isaiah, and each one theme - one per verse - acts to tie together the prophetic hopes of a people who waited not for just three or four weeks for the coming of the Lord, but for whole centuries. **We fit that identity too!**

If you read the whole hymn – it’s #56 in the Hymnal 1982 – what you find is two-fold:

1. First, there’s a substantial pre-Christmas wish-list – one that’s very different from the one that most of us would take to the mall! We ask, in this hymn, for instruction on how to be prudent; for redemption with an outstretched arm; for deliverance; for the release of prisoners; for enlightenment and for salvation. Jesus The One Who Will Come – Emmanuel – can begin the transformation of these hopes into reality. Nothing will come of that beginning of transformation is we fail to share in that hard work.
2. The second thing in “O come, O come, Emmanuel” is a recognition of some of the identities ascribed to the One Who Will Come: This week in verses 2 and 3 we sang about the “Wisdom from on high,” and the One Who Gave The Law.” Both of those identities are central to our faith.

“Sophia” is the Greek word for wisdom. In a Judeo-Christian context it’s the Divine Wisdom of God. In the Book of Proverbs, for instance, Sophia is described as being present at the beginning of creation: “*When there were no depths, I was brought forth when God established the heavens, I was there playing before [God] all the while*” (Prov. 8:24, 30). Sophia, Proverbs says, is “*the breath of the power of God, a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty, a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God and an image of [God’s] goodness.*”

Another Old Testament Book – Sirach – says: “*Happy is the person who meditates on Sophia, who reflects in one’s heart on Sophia’s ways and ponders her secrets, pursuing her like a hunter, and lying in wait on her paths.*”

“Her.” Sophia is always referred to as “she,” as Christian mystics like Thomas Merton and Hildegard of Bingen have observed. Merton said: “The Diffuse Shining of God is Hagia Sophia [ – “Holy Wisdom” – ]. Sophia is Gift, is Spirit..., is God-given and God Himself as Gift. Sophia in all things is the Divine Life.....”

We invite Jesus-as-Sophia in this hymn to come: we’re acknowledging that the fullness of God is reflected in humanity – male and female – as established in creation; that God is not confined to one gender.

Verse 3 talks about God’s identity as lawgiver, reflecting on the Sinai Event. Our challenge is how we understand that word “Law.” Today it gets closely – and inaccurately – linked to our

judicial system. Actually “Guidance” and “Instruction” are both ways to understand that word. “If you intend to live a life of faith that’s ethical, compassionate, actively generous, here’s how you can do that” is one way of understanding Torah Law.

We long for Jesus, the Sophia Wisdom, the Guide and Instructor of our faith, verses 2 and 3 say. We do so because we long to become our deepest selves, to live by love and not fear, to fulfill our dreams and God’s dream of Shalom. We know that we need God’s creative transformation.

Today we begin the journey to that celebration of the One who can – in partnership with each of us and all of us – bring this about, move this process along, open up this possibility for us. We are called to be active in our waiting, active in our preparing, that when Jesus-The-Wisdom-Of-God, Jesus-The-Instructor-And-Guide comes, we will be ready!!