**Isaiah 64:1-9**

 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--

 2 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!

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

 4 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.

 5 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.

 6 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.

 7 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.

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

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

**Mark 13:24-37**

24 "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,

 25 and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

 26 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.

 27 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

 28 "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.

 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

 32 "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

 33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

 34 It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

 35 Therefore, keep awake-- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,

 36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

**SERMON – Be awake in the darkness**.

I don’t know about you, but I live in a love-hate relationship with this time of year. I love the Christmas carols, the cheeriness of their melodies and the happiness of their words. I love the Christmas trees and the decorations. I love their warmth and their welcoming glow. I love the look of expectation on a child’s face, pressed against a window, hoping that maybe something will make its way to the Christmas tree. I love the cheer, the joy, the feeling that something good is going to happen….

But I hate what the world does to it…”Christmas” coming earlier and earlier each year; the rush to get everything done; the parties, the cookies that have to be baked, the presents that has to be bought for everyone with a name. I hate the exhaustion as we try to please everyone. But most of all I hate the real hurt and pain that is evident. There are faces of children who are starving on the TV, with someone begging to help over Christmas time; destruction caused by earthquakes and hurricanes and other natural disasters leave people helpless and desolate. I hate politicians with their mudslinging, who cannot give up their own agenda to comprise for the good of all people. There is the despair of people because they have to face the season without a loved one that meant the world to them, or who are far away from family and loved ones; those who have been diagnosed or is living with a disease that no one knows the end of; people who have lost their jobs, people who have lost their homes, parents who cannot feed their children, never mind provide them with a Christmas meal, and those who sleep on the street during the cold winter nights. Wherever you look, it is chaos. It is brutal, it is sad, and it is all wrong. It makes you want to cry out: “Where? Where are you God?” Or maybe “how long?” In our lowest points, we are tempted to wonder if things will be this way forever.

From the texts we read, it seems that this has been going on a long time. Isaiah was written in a similar time for Israel in their journey. What should have been a celebration and time of joy, quickly took a turn for the worst after the people returned from exile. They imagined being restored to their former glory as God’s people. But the city was in ruins and the temple was burned to a heap of ashes. The recovery was not magic, but hard and slow work. There were factions between the people in exile and the ones who stayed behind, between the exiles themselves and between the Israelites and other nations who didn’t want them to take back the city. The people were discouraged and lost heart, and they saw this struggle as evidence of God’s desertion. They turned back to their old habits, acting like children who trust God to love them and fix what they have broken, even when they wrecked it all.

Mark’s world wasn’t much better. The Roman armies vanquished the rebellion and destroyed the Jewish temple, desecrating what for Jews was nothing less than the sacred heart of the world. Christians were being prosecuted.

Isaiah, lamenting, cries out to God for another dramatic coming such as in the past at Sinai. He wants God to tear open the heavens and reach down. He wants God to show himself again, in power which was unexpected and awe-inspiring, dramatic and noisy. He doesn’t want God to play nice anymore. Like so many people in distress and confusion, he longs for the “one who is real” to break the silence; to break through the veil and set the world in order once again. He is longing for God to come and fix it and show everyone who is boss.

Isn’t that exactly what we would like to happen… for God to come down in a big bolt of lightning, and strike down those who are mean and evil; to heal all the sick and restore peace among nations; to restore this earth to its full glory?

Or maybe, things like that and the times we live in, make us want to run and hide, get in bed, pull the covers over my head, and hide until it is all over. Darkening skies, falling stars… sounds rather ominous to me. This is apocalypse in its truest form from ancient literature, meaning revealing or uncovering. When death-dealing forces seemed to have the upper hand, one ancient literary response was to envision an imminent future in which God directly comes to the rescue in spectacular fashion: righting wrongs, routing wrongdoers, and thereby inaugurating a new era of justice and compassion.

And yet, Jesus tells us to watch, stay awake and be alert. Amidst the darkness and sorrow, we are not just allowed to hide and wait for it to be over. We have to be watchful. We have to be awake. At the times we most think that God has abandoned us, left us to our own vices, without any hope for a peaceful future, we are told to carry on in chaos and darkness.

The Prince of Peace has come to earth as a child and as healer and yet, as I write these words, innocents are being killed in Syria and other innocents are forgotten in the United States, political leaders taunt each other with threats of nuclear war, accusations of sexual misconduct and harassment are daily placarded in the news, politicians deny humanity’s role in climate change, and the wealth continues to be redistributed from the poor and middle classes to the rich. The Prince of Peace is among us, a child and yet a ruler, and yet the reality of sin is apparent in polarization, alienation, racism, and violence, often perpetrated in the name of law and order. And we contribute these problems not to human unfaithfulness, but to God’s divine indifference, just as the people of Israel in Isaiah’s time.

But then the prophet stops. He gives us a time-out; a brief interlude, with a reminder that God is truly great. The prophet reminds us that human beings have always and everywhere struggled with our failures. We have always had periods when it felt like God was angry or absent. We have always been sin-infected, sin-contaminated, and prone to blow about like fallen leaves on a breezy autumn day. As such, we have always needed rituals to help us return to God, right our ship, realign our lives to God’s mission. The Season of Advent, as we prepare the way of the Lord, is one of those times.

We, today, have an advantage over these people. We already know that God has come to break open the heavens once. We know that he came to change things once. We know that he kept his promise in sending his beloved son, Jesus Christ, to this world to do something big. We know he came as a tiny baby, the son of a carpenter; a humble and meek man, who came to love, and not to destroy. In his ministry he preached radical change and a message of love. He promised that things will be different, not easy, but different; that things have changed, because he came to the world. And he told everyone who would listen, that God is present among them, and will be, until he comes again, to finally establish his kingdom. And then he died on the cross…

What a shock?! The disciples, the Jews, thought it was here; God’s in breaking, and yet he tells them to hang on and wait just a little longer…. He is going to leave again, but he will soon be back. He tells them to wait and watch! Not a passive waiting, hanging back, hoping that if things don’t get better, that they will end soon. He showed them and told them how to live their lives. They have to make a difference in the world… be the salt and the light, to preach the good news and love everybody; he told them that they did receive gifts from God, and not to squander it; to work with their gifts, multiply them and wait. Wait and watch. Jesus gave us the example of perfect life before Christ. And although we can only strive towards holiness, we cannot say that no one told us how to.

This season that we begin today — Advent — has a presence that calls us to look deeper. It whispers to us, urgently, in the dead of winter: “*Keep awake!*” It is a call of urgency and longing, but also a call of promise: there is hope. Things will not always be as they are. Something is coming that is even bigger than Christmas. Until then, we are the light of the world in the darkness. We are the hands and feet of Christ. We are the ones whom he commanded to make a difference. And maybe, as the world still waits for justice and the world still waits for peace, we need the time to examine who and what we are. Not that God has left us, but our complicity in the darkness. And maybe, when things seem at their darkest, that God has already come, and will come again. And until such a time, we are to continue his earthly ministry with the gifts we received. We need to continue to feed the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoner and welcome the stranger. We keep awake and watch, how little rays of light break into the darkness into our corners of the world, as we do as Jesus commanded – as the Father has sent me, so I also sent you.

The world still waits for God. We wait in darkness, knowing that we cannot know the specifics. We can only stay ready for what we know is coming — opportunity. Victory. Hope. Peace on earth. During this time we enter the shadows of despair, war, sorrow, and hate, actively waiting for Jesus to come, lighting candles of hope, peace, joy, and love. Advent whispers to us: the night is long and difficult, but the dawn is coming, as we cry with the multitudes, “Come Lord Jesus” and here the welcome response. “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!