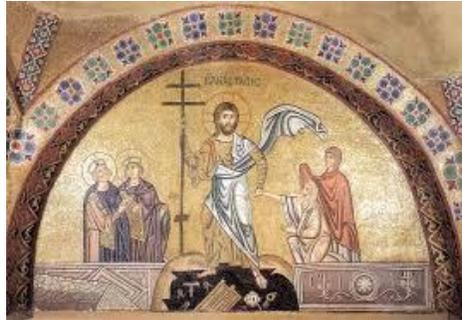


Journeying through the Revised Common Lectionary
Readings, Commentary, and Discussion Questions for December 3, 2017
First Sunday in Advent



THE READINGS

First Reading: Isaiah 64:1-9

- ¹ 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.

Worth Noting: A prayer of an oppressed people proceeds from praise (remembering the LORD's saving deeds of old), to contrition (attributing their current dire situation to their own sins), and to petition for reconciliation (calling on God as Father for deliverance). The Father God holds the people as closely as the potter molds her clay. How do you and your community ritualize this movement from praise through contrition to reconciliation? Is it a personal or a communal rite?

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
² before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us!

³ Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

⁴ O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.

⁶ You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.

⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

¹⁷ But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.

¹⁸ Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.

¹⁹ Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Worth Noting: In Advent, the Church petitions for the appearance and presence of the saving God in its midst. "Restore us," we pray . . . to what? What does Advent have to do with restoration?

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been

given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Worth Noting: In general Paul uses “grace” to mean “favor,” as in God’s favorable attitude to those in the fellowship of his Son. That favor rests not on human deeds but on God’s faithfulness to the reconciliation brought about by Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection (see, for example, Romans 3:24). Fair enough: How do “you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:7)?

Gospel: Mark 13:24-37

[Jesus continued speaking to four disciples:] “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.”

Worth Noting: Earlier in Mark 13 Jesus describes the fate of sinners. In the opening section above, he speaks of the gathering of the elect by the Son of Man, himself. In expectation of that day, do you think Jesus wants you to stay awake (“keep alert” or “keep awake” three times)? How do you do that?

CONNECTING WITH THE SCRIPTURES

Introduction to Advent

Each year we need to be reminded that the Christmas Holidays really start on December 25, Christmas Day, and not the Friday after American Thanksgiving. The Church has set aside the days of Advent (in 2017 from December 3 to December 24) in memory of the time before the Incarnation and in

preparation for the celebration of Christmas.

How do we remember the time before the Incarnation? The Church starts with a special focus on the prophet Isaiah, read on the first three Advent Sundays. It is Isaiah who reminds us of Israel's yearning for a Messiah, for one who would end the exile and establish a reign of justice. The Advent Psalms reinforce Isaiah's message, painting a picture of a world where "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss" (Psalm 85:10, from the Second Sunday in Advent December 10).

How do we prepare for Christmas? In the Northern Hemisphere, as the days shorten, we celebrate light – Jesus as the light of the world, and ourselves as the bearers of that light. We light homes and offices, and enjoy outdoor lighting displays. We connect. We turn our attention outward: buying gifts, remembering in a tangible way those who serve us all year round, writing year-end checks to service agencies, and singing with gusto carols learned in youth. We gather families and friends to dine. We prepare by shattering the darkness and connecting with others in the name of the One who is all in all (1 Corinthians 15:27-28).

Entering into the Scriptures

This Gospel comes two-thirds of the way through Mark's chapter 13 apocalypse. The chapter opens with Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple (verses 1-2) that quickly broadens into a portrait of the Last Days. These will open with wars and natural disasters (verses 3-8), followed by persecution of Jesus' disciples (verses 9-13), more natural disasters accompanied by false prophets tempting the elect (verses 14-24). Only then will the Son of Man appear to gather the elect from the farthest reaches of creation (verse 24-25).

Unlike typical Jewish and Christian portrayals of the end of time (like Matthew 25 read last week), Mark makes no mention of the fate of the evil ones, no mention of eternal damnation. While in Mark 9:43-49 Jesus warns his disciples against "stumbling" (!) lest they be "thrown into hell where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched," in general Jesus in Mark does not describe the fate of sinners – even those who commit the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Spirit (Mark 3:29).

Why was there such an omission? We can speculate that Mark and his community understood the true punishment to be the eternal absence of fellowship with God. An eternity of the grey, tedious life described by the Greek and Roman poets awaits the sinners.

Attention!

Why does the Lectionary start the Advent season with yet another portrayal of the last days? Didn't we have enough of that in November? (See *Journeying* for November 5, 12, 19, and 26 at <http://www.sttims.net/journeying-through-the-lectionary/>.) Advent serves double duty: We prepare to re-member the first Christmas, and we also prepare for the second coming of Jesus. It is for this coming that Jesus urges us to "stay awake." (Perhaps this year he tells us "Stay woke!")

It is a mystery that the Second Coming, ushering in the Reign of God, depends wholly on God and wholly on us. As Jesus indicates, the Second Coming is at the time and the discretion of God. But Jews and Christians agree that it is their work to prepare for God's coming by striving to realize God's reign in the time and space given to us. The sages insist that the fact that the goal will not be achieved in our lifetime is no excuse for not engaging the work to the best of our ability.

Prompting Conversations

Have you a tradition of particular Advent practices (some secular, some spiritual)? No matter how “secular,” how do these traditions help prepare for Christmas?

What does it mean to you to “stay awake”? How do you go about it?

To emphasize the role of humans in the Second Coming, a Jewish tradition holds that the Messiah will come when all Jews celebrate two Sabbaths in a row. How does your community work to establish the Reign of God in the here and now?



Dennis Haugh has enjoyed working with adult seekers for over 20 years. He aims to engage academic and general audiences for the New Testament. To hone his skills and burnish his credentials, he earned his PhD in Biblical Studies in the University of Denver/Illiff School of Theology joint program. He appreciates any correspondence: dennishaugh2011@gmail.com.

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