

“Come, Lord Jesus, Come!”

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

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I always feel a fresh tingle of excitement when the first Sunday of Advent comes around each year. Not only does it mean that we are now less than four weeks away from celebrating the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the coming of *God* into our world, but it's also the start of a new year in the life of the church. Every year we re-tell the story of the life of our Savior, and every year we begin that story anew in the season of Advent, with prophecies and prayers about the Messiah from Isaiah or other Old Testament prophets. This year, we begin with a passage from Isaiah 64, which opens with a prayer: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence ... to make your name known among your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!” It is the fervent prayer of one who longs for God to *appear again upon the earth*. The prophet looks back to times in the past when God came down in power and might to make himself known – such as when God came down in thunder and lightning at Mount Sinai, long ago. The prophet looks around at the sad state the world is in, proclaiming despondently that “there is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you.” The prophet looks upward to the heavens, pours out this prayer, and then looks forward with hope and expectation to a day in the future when God will return, when God will *shake the world up*, when God's righteous glory will be manifest for all to see.

It is a prayer that I share. I wouldn't go quite so far as to say that “there is *no one* who calls on God's name,” but there are *certainly* a tremendous number of people who do not take God seriously. I have learned a lot this past year, through the cries for racial justice and the abuses of power and the conspiracy theories and the baseless claims of widespread election fraud; mainly what I have learned this year is that there is a lot more racism, and a lot more injustice, and – frankly – a lot more *evil* in our country than I had previously believed. It has been a sad and sobering lesson to learn. I look around and wonder what has happened to *good old-fashioned Christian values and virtues*. They seem to be in short supply. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ... to make your name known among your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!” That is a prayer that I can utter with passion and feeling. To use words that are commonly said in Advent: *Come, Lord Jesus, come!*

I get excited when Advent comes around each year because it means we get to keep telling the same story, but now through the lens of a different gospel writer. We have a three-year cycle of readings that takes us through the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the three – shall we say – “storyteller” evangelists. The Gospel of John, which is of a qualitatively different character, gets featured at special times throughout the cycle. For the past year we have been hearing Matthew's version of the story; now we turn our attention to Mark's version. It's the same fundamental story, but told with more brevity, more *urgency*. It begins in earnest next week, as John the Baptist makes his

appearance in the desert, calling people to repentance. But today, on this first Sunday of Advent, the gospel reading reminds us that Jesus Christ didn't just come *once*, in the past. He will also come *again*, in the future. At some point – and we humans do not have the privilege of knowing when it will be – there will be an *event* of tremendous import for the entire earth. “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in heaven will be shaken.” This is a calamitous, history-ending event, the likes of which have never happened before and will never happen again. There have been numerous Christians throughout history who have thought they could predict with accuracy when, exactly, this event would take place; many of those estimates have already been proven wrong. The earliest Christians thought it was going to happen in *their own lifetimes*. Here we are, twenty centuries later, and it *still* has yet to happen. We are told that it will come “like a thief in the night;” we are told to “beware,” “keep alert,” “keep awake.” I do not know when it will happen. I don't *think* it's likely to happen anytime soon, but I could be wrong, and I really have no doubt that it *will* happen, sooner or later. These are the words of Jesus, after all.

In the midst of that event will come Christ himself. “They will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory,” says Jesus, quoting from a prophecy in the book of Daniel. Jesus says that when he comes, 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.” I don't know about you, but if this event were to happen in my lifetime, I'd like to find myself in *that* group, the group that Christ gathers and saves. But that requires fidelity, it requires uprightness of heart, it requires faithful devotion to our Lord and Savior. We can't serve Christ and serve our wanton, selfish desires – or selfish greed – at the same time. It requires constant self-examination, it requires the ability to recognize the sin that lives in you, it requires regular confession, repentance, and prayer. It requires the willingness to say: *Come, Lord Jesus, come!*

I also get excited at Advent because this is the *perfect* time to renew our steadfast devotion to the Lord. This is the *perfect* time to renew or re-commit to any spiritual practices that have enriched your life in the past – or new ones that you would like to try out. Some people find practices that they stick with year after year because they find them *so* incredibly enriching. Other people need to shake things up every now and then, to cultivate some new practice that they have never tried before.

There are Advent devotionals you can use, that typically include a brief passage of scripture, followed by some reflections and a prayer. We always make an Advent devotional available to the congregation every year; this year we are offering one that is based around the scenes and themes of the beloved Christmastime film *It's a Wonderful Life*. I'd encourage you to watch the movie – especially if you've never seen it – and use the devotional, as a way to pray: *Come, Lord Jesus, come!*

Children typically enjoy using their own Advent calendars, opening up one little door or window each day, counting the days till Christmas. We have provided Advent calendars to every child in our church. You can also buy children's Advent calendars in stores, though some of those are pretty secular. It's important that we stress to our children that the purpose isn't to count down the days until you get to open lots of presents. The purpose is to mark the days until we reach the celebration of the birth of Jesus, in Bethlehem, long ago. The point is to help our children pray: *Come, Lord Jesus, come!*

The beginning of Advent is a *perfect* time to start a new discipline of Bible reading. Maybe this is the year that some of you will commit yourself to finally reading the New Testament, all the way through, or reading the whole Bible, all the way through. There are a variety of different schedules and guides you can find online. Some of you may want or need something deeper. Maybe pick up a copy of

the *Apostolic Fathers* – that’s the collection of early Christian writings from the period just after the New Testament. We had a study group that was working our way through those writings at the beginning of this year, but our study got interrupted by the pandemic. We were *really* enjoying ourselves, though. Or maybe there’s a particular Christian author you want to learn from. Some of you who are concerned about race relations might really enjoy reading the collected works of the Rev. Martin Luther King. There are a couple paperback collection of his writings and speeches; they cost less than \$20; I can tell you where to find them. For myself, I’ve started reading the scripture readings that our Jewish brothers and sisters read in their synagogues every week and at festivals – for those are our scriptures too – and a collection of early Christian writings, and the works of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, just a couple pages of each, each day. All of those are books I’ve dabbled in in the past; all are books I’ve *wanted* to read for a long time. We’re all stuck at home a lot more than usual right now – why not put that time to good use, and *edify* yourself by learning and growing in your faith? *Come, Lord Jesus, come!*

There are also some disciplines of daily prayer that I would recommend. When the Jews were no longer able to worship in their temple after it was destroyed in 587 BC, they developed *wonderful* prayer rituals that they practiced in their homes. Two and a half millennia later, many Jews *still* engage in wonderfully rich daily prayer disciplines at home. Christianity developed some similar practices; these grew out of the ancient Jewish practices; in time there came to be what is called “the daily office,” involving anywhere from three to seven times of prayer each day. There are several versions of this; there’s a Catholic version, and an Orthodox version, and an Episcopal version, and a Lutheran version; there is even a Presbyterian version. Yes, there is a Presbyterian tradition of daily prayer, four times a day – in the morning, in the middle of the day, at evening (when the sun goes down), and at night. This cycle of daily prayer includes scripture readings and prayers and songs from the Bible, that correspond to the seasons of the church year. It’s very similar to the practice in other Christian traditions, very similar to the practices that both Christians and Jews have been using for an *extremely* long time. Unfortunately, not many Presbyterians are even aware that this kind of daily prayer exists. It can also be a little intimidating for people who are completely new to it, so I’ve been looking for ways to make it more accessible to people. If this is something you’d like to know more about, by all means, let me know and I will guide you in the right direction. It’s yet another way to say: *Come, Lord Jesus, come!*

Now I’ve named a *number* of different things you can do to enrich your spiritual life during this season of Advent and beyond. I’m not trying to overwhelm you; please do not feel obliged to do *any* specific thing I’ve said here. But, at the same time, please don’t just do *nothing*. We are all at different stages and places in our Christian journeys; some of you have more time on your hands than others do; the pandemic, of course, has changed daily life for a *lot* of us. All I’m trying to say is that I think today – the first Sunday of Advent – is a *great* day to commit or re-commit yourself to some kind of discipline or practice that will feed, nourish, and enrich your spiritual life. I’ve tried to lay out some options. Some might not interest you at all – and that’s okay. Others might have lit a spark. If there was something I said here that made you think, “Oh, that sounds interesting,” *trust* that feeling. That’s probably *God* nudging you in that particular direction. I’d like to encourage you to commit to *one thing* you’d like to try doing. Maybe it’s one *old* thing that you have tried before. Or maybe it’s something new. Let *God* lead you to a discipline and a practice that will feed and nourish you during this season of Advent ... through the dark days of this pandemic ... and throughout the whole course of the coming year, until we come together a year from now, to light the first Advent candle yet again. *Come, Lord Jesus, come!*

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