

Restore us, O GOD; let Your face shine, that we may be healed!
Isaiah 64:1 – 4; Mark 13:24 – 37

I don't like Mark chapter 13. If I could, I'd avoid it. *Is this true for anyone else?*

But avoiding it would be pretending that it isn't there. And it is. And every year at the beginning of Advent, we get one of these disturbing apocalyptic texts.

One of the reasons that we have to look at it, that we have to listen to it and sit with it is that these are words that have power over us. At least for some of us, these words have been used to instill fear. As a teenager I heard them often and they were used to paint terrifying end-of-the-world scenarios for which I, apparently a miserable human being, had better be prepared for. And so I prepared, again and again and again. I had no faith and lived in terror that I'd miss the master of the house.

But I'm now an adult. And what better way to explore this Text than in the context of this beloved community? Here, with each other, we can examine these words without fear. And perhaps we'll hear something new. We might even hear some Good News and begin to experience healing with the Text itself.

So let's be curious and explore!

Mark 13 is an apocalyptic text. And since we're being curious, let's look at what apocalyptic means. Apocalyptic is a worldview that's characterized by dualisms and divisions. One of these splits is reality. Apocalyptic sees the present reality, our lives here on earth, as terrible and evil and in a downward spiral. In contrast, the reality that's being anticipated is the Day of the Lord, when heaven breaks in and God is once again in control. As He was in the beginning. In this worldview, it doesn't really matter if we're awake or asleep because

there's no way to miss the master of the house coming home. It will be a flashpoint in history, God's punishment and vengeance pouring out in a dramatic turning the world upside down.

In the time of Jesus, people were waiting for such an apocalypse. They were waiting for God, who is up in the heavens to come down to earth, ending their occupation and oppression, turning the political and religious establishments upside down. They were waiting for the Day of the Lord when God, not the Roman Empire, would be in charge of their lives.

If we tell the truth, we too are waiting for an apocalypse. We too are praying that God “[will] tear open the heavens and come down...that the mountains [will] quake at [God's] presence.”

And as we confess our desire for God to break into our reality,
for God to take control of governments and institutions,
for God to reward the poor and oppressed and victims of injustice with justice,
while we long for God to mercilessly punish capitalists who grow their wealth on the backs of the poor,
for God to give life sentences to private prison executives and to those participating in the trafficking of human beings,
even as we pray for God's vengeance to rain down,
we see Jesus in front of us.

And seeing Jesus, we remember that God has already broken into history, that God has already been breaking into history. But we were asleep and didn't see. Mary wasn't asleep; she saw and heard God breaking into her life. The shepherds were awake. The disciples were awake; except for when they weren't. Because the nature of being awake as Jesus teaches us to be awake, is that it's something we learn. It's something we practice. And sometimes we're awake. And sometimes we're not.

So in Mark 13, Jesus is using the vocabulary of an apocalyptic worldview. But for those who are awake, they hear something else. Within the language of an apocalypse (means *revelation*) they hear a subtext, a subversion. And for the disciples, there's another apocalypse that will happen very soon. Jesus has been pointing to it, has been telling them about it, but they can't quite see it. The revelation of God was still unfolding...and it is still unfolding. Sometimes we're awake and see it; and sometimes we miss it.

We're often so bound by *our own* image of God and our own expectations of how God should come to us, that we miss the God that *is* coming to us, the God that Jesus is revealing. And we can't hear God speaking, "Don't be afraid." Our imagination is so influenced and corrupted by an apocalyptic worldview that we have a hard time imagining anything else. Our desire for a warrior god, for a commander-in-chief god and a supreme-court-justice god is so strong and so deep that we miss the Abba Father God that Jesus is revealing. And between last Sunday and today, we forget that we are already living in the Reign of Christ. That we are still living in the Reign of Christ. And Christ the King is already

at home in the humble places, lowly places, in hidden and forgotten places. The Day of the Lord has already come and is coming, here, with the last and the least.

The subtext of Jesus' words to the disciples isn't pointing them the end of the world; Jesus is pointing to his own end. To the end of *his* life. If our imagination is shaped by an apocalyptic worldview, we will miss Jesus' message. If our imagination is shaped by a vengeful and punishing God, our fear of God will keep us from hearing and seeing Jesus, God's beloved, the one who is already here, who is already at home with us.

Jesus was teaching his disciples *what it means* to live in the Kingdom of God and *how to* live in the Kingdom of God. And it requires staying awake, being attentive, looking, and listening. Because if we don't, we'll forget that God has already broken into history, not with the power of the military, but with the power of presence, and love, and grace, and forgiveness, and healing. If we don't stay awake, we'll stand around looking up, forgetting that Jesus, the Human One, has already come in the clouds. And those who saw him, those who encountered him, were restored, liberated, healed. If we aren't awake we'll forget that heaven has already come to earth, that God is already here, dwelling with us, among us, and within us. If we're asleep we'll forget that we are already living in the end, that the love of God and the eternal aliveness of God *is* already in control. We simply need to give ourselves to it and participate in it. And be at home in it.

Listen again to Jesus' words, "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*, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly."

These aren't words to make us afraid. With these words Jesus is telling the disciples what will happen in the next chapter of his life, when Jesus is betrayed and denied and crucified.

James Alison describes it:

It appears the Lord comes in the acts of being handed over which follow. He hands himself over at the Last Supper in the *evening*; he is handed over by Judas at *midnight*, by Peter at *cockcrow*, and to the Romans in the *morning*. The real coming is the very reverse of an apocalyptic appearance: it is the subversion from within of the apocalyptic, and will only be detected by those who have been disciplined to watch, those who have not been hypnotized...(On Being Liked p 12).

With this reading and understanding of Jesus' words, we hear something new. And in the next chapter when we watch and listen to Jesus with his disciples, we will see that they do fall asleep. While Jesus prayed, "Abba Father God" remove this cup," they slept. And while Jesus wasn't happy about it, he never threatened or punished them. It isn't in the nature of Jesus. And it isn't in the nature of God. Jesus had been praying to Abba God. He had been wrestling with his end. And he did so in the presence and power of the One who was creating him, the One who is love, unbound love, the One whose vengeance is forgiveness, whose revenge is mercy and grace and healing.

Living in the Reign of Christ, we are learning and practicing staying awake. Staying awake requires a certain kind of seeing. Ched Myers, in his commentary on Mark, writes: "The Human One's death and his revelation in power and glory are the same moment. It is through his demonstration of the nonviolent power of the cross that the powers are overthrown. But it takes the *bifocal* vision of [] faith to see (pp. 172ff)."

Bifocal vision gives us the ability to see the reality of the Reign of Christ within the reality of the time we are living. With bifocal vision, with Mary, we can say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” With the shepherds, when the world around us is asleep, we can see new life born in the lowly places. In the unexpected places. In unexpected people. In unexpected ways.

I want to tell you an Advent story, a story of the coming the Master in an unexpected way and with unexpected results.

I met Preston several years ago when he told his story at the Theology and Peace conference. Preston grew up in the South, in Christian. His was a family of faith. And he also grew up imagining the day when he’d be a lawyer. And he became a lawyer. He was good at it and soon became an appellate prosecutor in the Tennessee Attorney General’s office. His job was to review appeals, either recommending the court upholds, or not, a defendant’s sentence.

At some point a former professor invited him to teach a college class in a prison. And he did. As he learned to know the prisoners in his classroom, and to like them and respect them. He heard their stories. He met Christ in them. And his faith began to be challenged. The Jesus he had grown up with was not the Jesus being revealed in these prisoners. God was experiencing an apocalypse as God was waking him up.

And as his faith was challenged and changing, he was having a harder and harder time with his work. He could no longer sit in an office reviewing files of defendants. So quit.

One day he received a notice in the mail of a case that he had been part of. This wasn't unusual. But what was notable was that as he read the notice, he recognized the defendant. She was in one of his classes. Someone he'd been getting to know, he admired and respected her. They were friends. And here he was, seeing the role he had played in her incarceration. When he didn't know her it was easy to say, yes, she deserves life in prison—a life for a life. But the woman he had come to know was 16, being sold as a sex worker who one day killed the man who paid to spend the day with her. Now the sentence he had upheld was an injustice. Just as hard was the realization that Cyntoia was also receiving this notice and she would know that he had played a role in her life sentence.

The Master was at home. She forgave him and continues to forgive him. The defendant and the prosecutor continue to be friends. The wolf and the lamb are friends. But the lamb is still in prison, now a college graduate doing well given her circumstances. The wolf is working for now working to change laws, for restoration rather than punishment and vengeance. The defendant's forgiveness is saving and healing the prosecutor

As we enter Advent, may we do so with the intention of staying awake, assured that the Master is already home, and that we are already at home with the Master. May we look for the Lord's coming in unexpected ways and in unexpected places. We aren't waiting for the coming of a new baby in history, that has already happened. Jesus has been born. We are *living* in the Reign of Christ. With Mary we too are chosen and anointed and waiting to give flesh to the Christ, to give flesh to love and forgiveness, to grace and mercy and healing....