



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Advent 1, Year B
December 3, 2017

[RCL] Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Isaiah 64:1-9

On this first day of the liturgical year, we remember who we are as God's children, in total need of God's mercy. In Isaiah, this reality points to an underlying theme of Advent: our collective hope that God would address our separation from him, "would tear open the heavens and come down" (v. 1) and "consider" us (v. 9). The important word here in the first verse is "would," which is not the same as "will"! We have no right to say to God, "We know you *will* come down and help us." Because we're not in any position to get what we want from God, since "all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth" (v. 6a). If God is going to help us this Advent, it's because God does so completely voluntarily.

It's funny that Isaiah says to God, "because you hid yourself we transgressed" (v. 5b). How human of Isaiah! It's almost like he's attributing fault to God for our sinfulness – "we sin because you're not here, God!" But in the person of Jesus, God gently corrects us, saying "Yes, I am here; now go and sin no more."

- Isaiah imagines "that the nations might tremble at [God's] presence" when God comes (v. 2). What does that look like to you? What about God's impending reign should the powers of the world be afraid of?
- Have you ever found yourself blaming God for your own wrongdoing?

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

When we sing psalms in worship, there's often an "antiphon," a particularly resonant verse which bears repeating. If a choir or cantor is singing the psalm, the congregation might chime in every few verses with the antiphon. Or maybe everyone will sing the antiphon at the beginning and end of the psalm. The antiphon is usually inserted by an editor, in order to enhance congregational participation.

But in today's psalm excerpt, we have an antiphon that's built into the psalm itself, not inserted by a modern editor: "Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved" (vv. 3, 7, 19). We repeat this because our desire to be saved and restored in the image of God is not a one-time thing; it's constant. Our life consists of seeking God, losing God, and finding God, over and over again.

The liturgical year is by definition repetitive. Advent is celebrated every year. Moreover, we'll read these exact lessons again in three years, once the lectionary circles back on itself. In repeating these holy days and seasons, we're reminded to think of our lives, as best we can, in line with God's time.

- How would you characterize "God's time"? Are there times when you've felt that God's sense of time matched well, or poorly, with your own sense of time?

- Do you like repetition (habit, routine), or do you find it annoying? Maybe this has an impact on what kind of worship you or your parish gravitate toward. In terms of worship life, what about repetition can be fun, or challenging, to a faith community?

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Paul congratulates the Christians at Corinth for being open to the testimony of Christ, such that “you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 7). But now that we’re in the New Testament, can’t we say that “the revealing” of Jesus already happened? Why is Paul talking about it now, as if it’s something that has yet to happen?

This is another curiosity of Christian time – in a sense, it’s trans-time. Yes, Jesus has come, but we also believe that he existed before the foundation of the world as the Supreme Word. Plus, we believe that he will come again to be our judge. Paul and his compatriots believed something like this: that Jesus would return very soon, to put an end to the corrupt Roman world order.

In Advent, we look forward not only to Jesus being born in Bethlehem, but also to that “day of our Lord Jesus Christ” at the end of time (v. 8).

- Does it bother you that Paul talked so much about Christ coming again, but that Christ didn’t end up doing that in Paul’s time? How do we, as modern Christians, wrestle with our belief in Christ’s return?
- Paul says, “God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 9). How were *you* called, in particular? What is the story of your arrival to Christian faith and fellowship?

Mark 13:24-37

Speaking of Jesus coming again...

In this reading, Jesus speaks cryptically about the end times, in which God “will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (v. 27). Not only is this described in a visually scary way, with eclipses and falling stars, but in fact, there’s something even more terrifying about it: “Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come” (vv. 33).

So, Jesus tells us to “keep awake” (v. 37). This is exactly what we’re doing during Advent: trying to stay focused on Christ’s entering into the world. Because when it happens, it’ll happen in a way we never expected: not in the form of a king or warrior (as traditionally understood!), but with Jesus of Nazareth, the Prince of Peace.

- Living in a world that faces so many existential threats, we truly don’t know when the end of the world will come. Does this modern reality make you read this passage differently?
- What does “keep[ing] awake” look like in your faith community? In your personal faith life?

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