

## *Wishing and Hoping*

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*Text: Mark 13.24-37*

'But in those days, after that suffering,  
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 the heavens will be shaken.

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

'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. So also, when you see these things taking  
place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will  
not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass  
away, but my words will not pass away.

'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son,  
but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.  
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. 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. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

*Isaiah 64.1-9*

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—  
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!  
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
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.  
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.  
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.  
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.  
Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,  
and do not remember iniquity for ever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

It may not be obvious to us, but Biblical scholars point out that this passage is stylized and structured in a particular literary form something like a psalm. The original readers would have recognized and understood it as a poem of lament. It was probably written by followers of the second Isaiah, after they had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. The situation is that they are back, which should make them happy – but they are finding that it's hard to get settled again, and the temple isn't rebuilt yet, and life just isn't all that great.

They address God with great intensity, and emotion. We see a kaleidoscope of feeling as the people plead with God to come down and do something. They express huge admiration and love – *no ear has heard, no eye has seen any God but you!* Remembering the great exploits of the past, they reproach God for this apparent absence. Let your adversaries realize how mighty you are! In their sense of baffled betrayal, they get all mixed up about who is to blame – yes, we transgressed, but we sinned because you hid yourself! And we admit it, yes, we are all utterly unclean, we are filthy cloth. But we fade away anyway so who cares? But you *hid* yourself from us! You did *not* let your face shine. Then they switch again to a kind of sincere devotion and intimacy. Father, they say. You form us, for you are the potter, we the clay. And at the end of the day, they make their point. They stake their claim on God, their connection – *now consider, they say, we are all your people.*

Biblical scholars identify this passage as a lament, but it's also a protest. It expresses the tremendous longing of the people for things to be right. You have power, you should be using it for good. The situation is impossible! Something has to change! The protest is emotional and disorganized. A bit self-contradictory. Incoherent in a lot of ways.

In that sense it's like the Occupy Movement. Everybody knows that for the kinds of reforms we need, there have to be careful, serious, complicated discussions at all kinds of levels about policy and laws and corporate practices. Endless negotiations among nations and shareholders and stakeholders are the only thing that will allow rhetoric to yield real change. There is a need for a new Magna Carta moment with the emerging world leaders, the ones who are not elected but employed by corporations. And each one of us is called to become involved somewhere, on some topic, at some angle of incidence. But the Occupy Movement both as it began and as it continues,

makes the point – it insists, it is the people who matter, *all* the people. We are Christians, so we would say, All of God’s beloved children. The Occupy Movement, with its tents and yurts and social experiments and youthful energy, did a great job here in Toronto. Without violence, it expressed, perhaps on all our behalf, the burning desire for something to happen that will make things right. It acted out the longing for a new world. It underlined the need for change. Multiply by a large factor when we look at Egypt or Syria. Even when we accept that reaching the goal will require more than wistful hopes or idealistic slogans, the expression of desire for change is a critical piece of the process. A protest is a communal lament.

There was an element of lament and protest here at Bloor Street, too, as we looked around us at a candle-lit memorial for Jenna Morrison, the palpable longing of the people gathered, the desire for meaning, the hope for deep connection. And the need for change.

Or bring it down to the level of the little lives we live – our own longings and wishes and hopes for a different future.

And really, that is what Advent is about. Advent is about desire. About wishing and hoping. And we aren’t desiring a sweet little Christmas, with snowflakes and sleigh-bells. We are desiring a world transformed. Hoping for a life transformed. If only something major would happen, cries Isaiah! Restore us, says the Psalmist, let your face shine.

Without the wishing and the hoping, we are diminished. Limited to a small-minded reality and confined to what we think is possible. Eleventh century Sufi philosopher Sohrawardi uses the image of a mirage

If your eyes are not deceived by the mirage  
do not be proud of the sharpness of your understanding.  
It may be your freedom from this optical illusion  
is due to the imperfectness of your thirst.

The imperfectness of thirst, the failure of desire, the lack of wishing and hoping, will keep us from Advent. Will prevent us from saying, with Isaiah, Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down.

What an odd sense of humour the compilers of the lectionary must have to choose these readings for the beginning of Advent! Isaiah says, Come down! And the

Mark passage that Douglas read replies, Lo, he comes, with clouds descending. That solves that.

But no, as always, Jesus makes it more difficult – here's the rub, he says: You have no idea when this is going to happen or what it is going to look like. So stay alert! Stay awake. Watch for this! And so we are left with our longing. As the church year begins again, we turn with the whole Christian community, gathered over the last two thousand years, and begin to wait again.

Not from the clouds, as a king. You don't know when or where, says Jesus. Start getting things ready. The hearth, the table. You have to watch – look at the trees, see if hope begins to blossom. Look to the east, scan the horizon. Listen for angel singing. Look in the faces on the street. This arrival will be harder to find, appearing in the dead of night, a young mother, an obscure family, a stable. A baby's cry. A tiny child will be the shining face of God. And all earth is waiting.