

“God So Loves the World: Restore Us”

Homily by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Isaiah 64:1-4, Psalm 80:1-3, Mark 13:24-27, 33, 37

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.

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

“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.

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

Keep alert! Stay awake! Mark’s Gospel calls. Stay awake-- you don’t want to not be ready. You don’t want to miss this.

These readings always come to us on the first Sunday of Advent as a new church year begins and we, as the church, we embark again on the story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Advent is designed precisely to help us wake up and get ourselves ready. And so it opens with strong and even shocking words as if to say “Wake up, people. Pay attention. God is preparing to do a new thing. This world is a mess—oh don’t we know! Your own life may be a mess. But that will not be how the story ends, says God. You have thought I was far away, says God. But no. I am very near. Nearer than you can imagine. I am coming to be with you always. Pay attention. Get ready for a new story to begin.”

The word “advent” comes from the Latin *adventus* and refers to the coming of Christ, first in his birth and finally at the end of time to reconcile all things to God our Creator. In its wisdom, the church set aside this season, these four weeks, as a gift to us, time set apart in which we might prepare our hearts, our minds, our souls for all that this means. It’s a time designed to help us pay attention, to wake up and make ourselves ready for the gift God is ready and eager to give. God’s gift of God’s own love for our world and for each and every one of us.

Advent is just the season we need right now. Because, as a British author and missionary has written, Advent “is a time of exquisite balance between the sadness of the times we live in, and the bliss of the world we would like to live in...[it is] a cry for the coming reign of God.”

Oh, our world is in such a perplexing, frightening, perplexing, mind-numbing mess these days, isn’t it? Almost every conversation contains something along the lines of “what do you think about” this or that, pulled from the late-breaking news of the day. And so it was so refreshing to hear one newscaster conclude this week with “And now, at last, a happy story to cap off our broadcast tonight.” In case you missed it—it’s the story of the engagement of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, to be married in St. George’s Chapel in Windsor Castle next May. Don’t we love a love story? Whew! Hurray for them! Hurray for us, whose hearts can still be lifted by the most basic and beautiful story of all—love.

Well, for us Christians, Advent and Christmas tell again another love story, the ancient story of God’s love for us, love that God gives to us, for us, for us and our salvation. “Restore us, O God,” the Psalmist had pleaded, “restore us. Let your face shine that we might be saved.” Visit us, heal us, renew us, restore us--fill us with your love, your power, your hope, your joy.

And you know---just when we’re at our lowest, just when we’re tempted to think that maybe God has gone AWOL and given up on us and our crazy world, the Word of God breaks through—“Wake up,” my people. “Stay alert.” I’m on my way, proclaims our God.

The Rev. J.B. Phillips, that Anglican priest whose *New Testament in Modern English*, written between the two World Wars to bring scripture alive to his youth group, tells the following story in one of his sermons. It’s a wonderful imagined story about just what God is up to in choosing to become incarnate, to become one of us in Christ Jesus, for us and for our salvation. It goes like this:

“A senior angel is showing a very young angel around the splendor of the universe. They view whirling galaxies and blazing suns, and then flit across the infinite distances of space until at last they enter one particular galaxy of 500 billion stars. As the two of them draw near the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angle, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

"I want you to watch that one particularly," said the senior angel, pointing with his finger. "Well, it looks very small...to me," said the little angel. "What's special about that one?"

He listened in stunned disbelief as the senior angel told him that this planet, small and insignificant..., was the renowned Visited Planet. "Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince...went down in person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why should he do a thing like that?" The little angel's face wrinkled in disgust. "Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that He stooped so low as to become one of those...creatures on that floating ball?"

"I do. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him."

The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was beyond his comprehension."

If we're honest, such a thought is still beyond our total comprehension, too, isn't it? That the great and mighty God of the universe, the God of all time and space, cares so much about us? That such a God would choose to come down and live with us, among us, as one of us, for us and for our salvation?

This is one of the most important things we can take in, this Advent season, as we prepare again for the birth of the Christ Child. God loves us—not for God's sake, but for ours. Surely the God who created us, whom we have disappointed and disavowed many times over the centuries, surely God might have wanted to love us for God's sake, to make good on God's intention from the beginning.

But that's not it at all! God loves us for our sake. God loves us and longs for our salvation. God wants to deliver us from sin and brokenness. God wants to deliver us from evil and from harm. God loves us. More than we can say. More than we can ever fully take in. But still, it is this love that over and over and over and over again is given, to restore us, to lift us up and save us, to give us new life.

This is how John Wesley, on his deathbed could say to those gathered 'round: "The best of all is—God is with us."

So—let's wake up to the most amazing gift ever given.

In the words of the church's great poet and prophet Howard Thurman: "May the sounds of Advent stir a longing in your people, O God. Come again to set us free the dullness of routine and the poverty of our imaginations. Break the patterns which bind us to small commitments and to the stale answers we have given to questions of no importance. Let the Advent trumpet blow, let the walls of our defenses crumble, and make a place in our lives for the freshness of your love, well-lived in the Spirit, and still given to all who know their need and dare receive it. Amen."

Notes:

Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Opening the Scriptures: Faith through the Year* (London: Continuum, 2000) p. 49.

J.B. Phillips story from Philip D. Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) quoted in William H. Willimon [incarnation] *The Surprising Overlap of Heaven and Earth*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013)

Howard Thurman in *The Mood of Christmas*. Friends United Press (October 1, 1985)

© Rev. Patricia Farris 2017. Permission is given for brief quotation with attribution. All other rights reserved.