

The Advent Puzzle
Isaiah 64: 1-9/Mark 13: 24-37

Advent is a somewhat puzzling season. The dictionary describes the word as referring to something that is coming. But is that still what it means within the church...within your concept of Advent? Do you view this time of year as a time when something is coming...as a time of anticipation? And if so, what are you anticipating...Christmas morning and presents or something more? Advent is sometimes compared to Lent as a season of Preparation. During Lent this preparation concentrates on repentance as we prepare for remembering Christ's journey to the cross, yet repentance is rarely ever mentioned during Advent as we prepare for Christ's incarnation without which Lent and Easter would not be possible. Why do we not contemplate our sinfulness and need for repentance at this time...at the very beginning of the journey Jesus walked because that sinfulness lies at the root of the need for our reconciliation with God which Christ accomplished. The Advent Season is puzzling in another way. At the end of both these times of preparation, we celebrate a type of birth, of new life. We celebrate God's promises and faithfulness to those promises at both Easter and Christmas. These are the two most attended services within the Christian congregations. These are the bookends which celebrate Jesus' life. The Hebrew passage this morning from Jeremiah represents the voicing of a hope within a time of hopelessness. The passage from Isaiah is a plea made to God to forget iniquities and act with awesome deeds that will restore Israel. Both of these reflect the world before Jesus walked the earth. Both expressed the expectation that God would act in the world. The Gospel message from Mark represents a dramatic warning about the need to be awake and prepared for the time when the Son of Man comes back in power and glory. In fact, within the gospel of Mark there is no nativity description. In Mark we first encounter Jesus as an adult. To some extent we live somewhere in the in-between of Isaiah and Mark. We know God's promise of a righteous branch has been fulfilled, and as Isaiah said God's awesome deed came in a totally unexpected manner--a manger in a small village. And the fulfillment the prophets expected of a ruler who would redeem did not fit the anticipated vision they had in form or in manner. Jesus came and the kingdom of God came near. Yet today we still live in a broken world where hope is sometimes difficult to find and despair is a common reality. So we still seem to live within that reality of Jeremiah and Isaiah—hoping for God's justice and peace to come and be present in our world. Mark's gospel written with the knowledge that God has acted and has entered the world is also our reality. Mark's gospel is one where the emphasis is on the immediate and the urgent. His narration of the life and ministry of Jesus is filled with action. The word immediately is used frequently. Yet in this passage sounding the theme of warning to be alert and prepared, we have two extreme messages about Jesus' second coming. Verse 29-30: "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." Which is followed by Verse 32: But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, only the Father." It seems that the warning has two seemingly paradoxical messages. First, there is a need for believers to prepare for an imminent apocalypse. The second coming is going to happen while they are still living. In the second message believers are counseled to dig in, stay faithful and prepare for the long haul. Since two thousand years have passed since the time of Christ, there is an obvious tendency to conclude that the first message did not happen. The result of that which could be reached is since there

was no immediate apocalypse for the believers of Mark's time there is no need to expect one now. Because of the time interval that already exists, there are many who think that we do not need to worry about what happens when Jesus returns. After all, it hasn't happened yet. No one knows when it will occur, just look at all those who have predicted a time which has then come and gone. So one of our readings for this morning seems to be describing the distant past, while the reading seems to refer to the unknowable future. Taken together with the knowledge we have of God's faithfulness to promises given and the reality of Jesus' birth, how do we understand this Advent, this season of preparation for an event that has already happened and its relationship to the event yet to come. These two different passages might seem to make Advent a time of counting down to remembering the nativity scene, ignoring the reality that our world is still broken and unable to maintain a sense of urgency over an event that cannot be scheduled. But when we read Isaiah's words which are a plea to God from the heart of despair, a prayer for God to act so the mountains would tremble as has happened in the past don't they resonate with how we find the world around us. This passage reflects Israel's collective memory of when God came down and made visible to all the power of God who formed them. This passage also reflects their sense that God has hidden from them because of their transgressions. There is also some sense that they blame God for their situation. Isaiah 64: 5, "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." What if we take this passage and view it as a description of our time and world. We can identify with the statement that the iniquities of our world are prevalent. In many aspects God's ways are not remembered and the world is broken, filled with injustice, violence, hatred and despair, all those things which are described through the voices of the prophets. In this passage, Isaiah accuses God of hiding, but then, as now it seems more likely that people no longer looked for God's presence. When God is not sought, then our iniquities grow and we can be taken away from God by them. Yet even as Isaiah makes this charge against God, he does so from a point of faith saying, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." One of the pieces of the puzzle that is Advent is then to consider how we are like those who were waiting on God to answer Isaiah's pleas for God to come back down and be present as in the times of Moses. Within the two messages of Mark's understanding we can actually find one. Because the timetable for Jesus' return is known only to God, we need to live as though the end is at hand and we need to dig-in for the long haul so that we are prepared whenever it does happen. Being constantly alert is not an easy or comfortable state. Waiting for something to happen when the time of waiting is not defined makes it easy to postpone preparations. It becomes easier to forget what has been revealed to us about God's expectations for us, to let our iniquities grow so that we fail to find God's presence with us. I have talked about two aspects of the Advent Season this morning, but there is another piece of the puzzle which brings these two things together. The manger scene which does not actually appear in Mark's Gospel account holds the key. In the Incarnation God came down to join us; in Jesus Christ the promise was fulfilled and God's faithfulness to humanity was confirmed. The way to reconciliation was opened. Like the early believer, we still do not have a timetable for when God will decide to end things. We do however have the Holy Spirit to guide us in this in-between time. That is the answer to the Advent puzzle. Advent is not just a time to remember Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. It is a time for us to look around us and even in the midst of this

brokenness to see and feel God's presence. It is a time to come to the realization that Christ's presence in the world changed it for all time. While the kingdom has not come fully into this world as we seek to remember and live according to God's ways, it comes ever nearer. If we use this season of Advent to come to experience more fully the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives we can wake on Christmas morn to a fulfilled hope: Emmanuel, God with us, is here. Amen.