

## 1 Advent B

Isaiah 64:1-9

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

**Rev. Trish Schmermund**

Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Edmonton

November 29, 2020

*38<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Social Distancing*

---

Grace and peace to you from Christ who is coming and who is. Amen.

One time, as a little girl, I was shopping with my mom in the Woodward's grocery store (I know that dates me, but hey...). As often happens with small children in tow, I suddenly found myself alone with no mother in sight, right by the bakery counter. In those days they still made vanilla slices, brownies, cream puffs, cookies – all from scratch – and one might have thought, “what a convenient place to be lost!” Yes, the woman at the bakery counter took me in, allowing me to come with her behind the large glass cases that displayed the delicious treats. And there I waited. It seemed like a very long time. She made the announcement, “we have a lost little girl, with a polka dot dress (that was my favorite, I called it my “Smartie” dress, because the dots looked like the candy) she has brown hair, blue eyes, and is about 5 years old.” My mom was probably in the next aisle, but there I was, lost and afraid, without my mom, even though 2 months earlier I had walked all by my 5 year-old-self down highway 28 (when it was really a highway!) from Griesbach where we lived, to Northgate Mall to buy candy at the drugstore. But this time was different; I wasn't exercising my independence, I was unexpectedly separated and as worried as you might expect a little girl to be. So anxious I was, that I didn't have any interest in the pacifying cookie offered by the kind woman. It seemed a poor consolation for what I was really in need of.

And yes, my mom came and rescued me.

And I'm sure, for the rest of *that* shopping trip at least, I had an iron grip on the wires of the cart, not daring to gamble a second mishap.

Mark's passage about a darkened sun, falling stars, and shaking heavens can leave us feeling rather lost. We're not sure how to apply the example of a sprouting fig tree or the idea that the heavens and earth would pass away! And to hear that this will happen, but *who knows when*, doesn't offer much comfort.

That kind of news, if taken at face value, would make it easy to “stay alert.” Who could relax with such impending doom? We'd run to our loved ones, like JP Saxe and Julia Michaels singing, “If the World was Ending:”

*But if the world was ending  
You'd come over, right?  
You'd come over and you'd stay the night  
Would you love me for the hell of it?  
All our fears would be irrelevant  
If the world was ending  
You'd come over, right?  
The sky'd be falling and I'd hold you tight  
And there wouldn't be a reason why  
We would even have to say goodbye  
If the world was ending  
You'd come over, right?*

Yes, in a crisis, we immediately know what is most important. We know who is important. It's as if we suddenly gain a keen sense of clarity; we're able to let fall all the extraneous pieces that fill our days and clutter our attention.

But the slow burn of this pandemic, the unfolding of violence and corruption, the worries and grief we carry on a day to day basis, the unspoken fears - are accumulating, and we are looking, hoping for a way out. We've been in Advent for 8 months now waiting. We're well past the point of a pacifying cookie, but need our mom, our God, to come and rescue us from this lost experience. Someone who will restore some sense into a broken world, someone who will inspire new vision and ideas, someone who will look out for the lost and least, someone who'd *come over when the world was ending, right?* – 'cause some days that exactly how it feels.

As this Advent begins we have been thrust into waiting, not for sales, or holidays, or for Christmas parties. Those extraneous things have taken a backseat to our deep longing to be together, for some return to the way things used to be, to be able to celebrate, cry, love, just be with one another. We all thought a few weeks of isolation (back in the spring) was a fine effort we could get behind, but we weren't expecting a marathon. We were not expecting that the world and our lives would be changed by something so small.

The call of Advent, "Stay awake. Stay vigilant. Stay alert," the traditional themes of *waiting* and *hoping* are very appropriate. We are not, however, the first ones who have had to wander the desert or have our lives torn apart, or to grieve a way of life lost. We're not the first ones to wonder

about bringing a baby into such a world. We're not the first to carry hope deep in our bellies waiting for new life to crown.

That's why knowing the stories of the scriptures is so helpful. We can see the context of our own life in them. We can see the determination, pain, problems, similar to our own. We can be reminded that when we carry too much or make mistakes or are under the rod of oppression or are the oppressors, when we're lost, alone, afraid – we can see again and again God's abiding presence with us.

Take this passage from Isaiah. The Israelites had been in exile for years, away from family, friends, their way of life, but here in this part of Isaiah their exile was over. It still wasn't easy though. Things never did return to "normal. Their long waiting and hoping for God to intervene and set things right transformed to an understanding that God had never left them in the first place. As we hear in Isaiah, "From ages past no ear has ever heard, no eye has ever seen any God but you intervening for those who wait for you!" (v.4) "...we are all the work of your hands." (v. 8)

In this is a deep seated reflection, hindsight if you will, that God was there all along: in their defeat, in their wailing, in their humiliation and captivity, in their longing for return, in their family struggles, in their grief. It's a story to us in our own exile to remind us that God is here; like my mom who in the grocery store was close, but unseen to me, God is near.

And so this Advent, as people of faith, may we call upon one another to remember the ways God has journeyed with us all along. And I want to offer 4 things we can do this season to stay alert:

1. Pray. I know it seems pretty low key, but prayer changes the world, because it changes us. And I mean really pray. It doesn't have to be hands folded and eyes closed, but open your eyes to see what's needed around you, in our neighbourhood, in your family. Pray for somebody you don't even know. Pray together.
2. Build relationships. To be certain this has been challenging in this pandemic – it's as if we've been holding our breath for things to be back to normal. But, what if we stopped holding our breath, what if we embraced the ways we are able to connect, the technology that is available to us? What if we dared to learn (or teach others) how to be creative and have meaningful conversations over the internet, phone or even through good old fashioned letters? Be open to new possibilities and what God might be teaching in this moment.

3. Lean on your church. Lean into the gift of faith. Within them are many millennia of God and people at work together. I'm so grateful for these stories, for this history that teaches us our value, our beloved-ness. Let the love and good news of God be your bedrock in an uncertain time. Ask questions, seek insight, listen for the Spirit. Check in with one another.
4. Give yourself away. Look around you and inside you – you are incredibly gifted and equipped for this moment in history. Do what you can, help who you can, encourage who you can. Wear a mask. Think of the silent ones who are affected or who are working behind the scenes to make the world better in small unrecognized ways. What can you do to show gratitude, to support, to encourage? These times are pregnant with new opportunities to be generous of the person you are.

There are many possibilities, these are just a few. We stay alert, by continuing in faith, by exploring new dimensions of service, by repurposing old traditions. We stay alert by remembering we are in this together. Thanks be to God. Amen.