

**A Sermon by Rev. Eric R. Dillenbeck
What An Entrance
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
November 30, 2008**

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— 2as 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!

3When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 4From 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.

5You 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. 6We 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.

7There 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. 8Yet, O Lord, you are our Creator; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. 9Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13:24-37

24“But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
25and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

26Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. 27Then 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.

28“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. 29So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

32“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34It 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. 35Therefore, 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, 36or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

“What An Entrance”

A few years ago Hollywood re-made one of my favorite 80's movie musicals. Hairspray tells the story of Tracy Turnblad, a pleasantly plump girl, who tries to become a TV dancing sensation while at the same time championing Civil Rights in Baltimore during a time of racial segregation.

It is a pretty good remake, I enjoy it and so do my children, but for me, there is one scene which transcends the movie. Queen Latifah, as Motormouth Maybelle, a local radio personality and leader in the African American community, leads a protest through the streets of Baltimore. During the peaceful march Queen Latifah sings about the experience of the struggle for racial equality, and in so doing she captures the essence of the Advent Season.

Let's listen...

There's a light In the darkness
Though the night Is black as my skin
There's a light Burning bright
Showing me the way But I know where I've been

There's a cry In the distance
It's a voice That comes from deep within
There's a cry Asking why
I pray the answer's up ahead
'Cause I know where I've been

There's a road We've been travelin'
Lost so many on the way
But the riches Will be plenty
Worth the price we Had to pay

There's a dream In the future
There's a struggle That we have yet to win
And there's pride In my heart
'Cause I know Where I'm going Yes I do
And I know where I've been YEA
FADE...

I know where I'm going
I know where I've been.

In this unconventional Advent Hymn Motormouth Maybelle highlights what Henri Nouwen calls Advent's two fold character. It is a time of preparation for the celebration of the first coming of God's son to the world in the birth of a babe in a manger, and a period of reflection pointing us to Christ's second coming at the end of time depicted in today's reading from Mark.

Now I know, Thanksgiving has passed and all we want to do is sing carols and put up the tree. During this season we like to think that all is right with our world because the hymn tells us "all is calm, all is bright." But Isaiah and Mark remind us that there is more to the season of Advent than Carols and Glad Tidings.

In Isaiah we see the Hebrew community crying out for God to come into a world where things are not the way they should be. After years of living in exile in a foreign land they just wanted to come "home" and regain a sense of normalcy and identity in God's temple, their place of refuge.

But what they found was a Jerusalem that had been decimated and a temple that was a smoldering ruin. *“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence”* – mournful words of the people of God simply asking – WHERE ARE YOU? COME BACK TO US! We know we are but clay in your hands and you are our potter. We are your people and we need you.

The Israelites’ despair moved them to call out to their God because they expected God to be there; they expected God to come into this deep dark night of their soul to bring comfort and guidance. This is what Advent is about. Susan Andrews, former moderator of our General Assembly, says, “Advent anticipates the coming of God into the deepest darkness of our lives. It demands that we leave the shade up on the woes and weariness of the world – the woes and weariness of our own souls – for it is in the midst of darkness that the light of new life will come.”ⁱ

As hard as we try, we cannot hide from the darkness of our lives for we know where we have been. Where we live, this season is marked as much by darkness as by light. The days grow shorter, darker and colder as winter makes inroads on the seasons of our life.

The news of people losing their jobs, their life savings in the aftermath of an economic downturn of historic proportions darkens the brightness of our days. The accounts of poverty, hunger and fear and the continued plight of those living in the shadow of AIDS darken the brightness of our days. The realities of mental illness, family dysfunction, and disease dampen our desire to celebrate. But from the midst of these realities we call out to God. *“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence”*

We call out to God because we know where we have been and where we are going.

We know that into the darkness of Israel’s reality and into the darkness of our lives the light of new life came in the birth of an infant in a stable. From this very unusual birth comes the grace filled life of the Child of God who tells us not to fear because economic ruin, illness, death and despair will not have the last word.

Why not? Because Christ lived, Christ died and Christ will come again.

In today’s reading from Mark, Jesus instructs the disciples to watch for his second coming. He helps them know that he will make quite an entrance with plenty of earthshaking and clouds. He will be surrounded by angels to gather us up from the far ends of the earth and heaven.

This Promise is presented here in Mark before Jesus moves to his cross, but in the context of our church year it is a call to expectancy, preparation, heightened awareness, and self examination.”ⁱⁱ It is a call for us to remember where we have been and where we are going.

In a season when we long to hear the story of God’s incarnated love for all the earth it can be hard to hear the good news in this kind of language, which can be scary to many a young child and more than a few fundamentalists. But this is indeed a Promise of glad tidings and joy.

To make sense of it we have to remember this kind of Apocalyptic Literature addresses people who are in distress and who feel abandoned by God. The people to whom Mark wrote were a people in distress, suffering persecution.

The roots of their lives were being cut away by the powers and principalities of their time. In some ways this could be said about our time as well.

Wars rage while the world economy falters.

Hunger and poverty come knocking on our doors looking for the Justice that has been promised and the best we can do is put what feels like a temporary patch on what seems to be an ever growing problem.

It is hard not to look around and question God's presence in the face of such realities.

It is to these realities that Mark's apocalyptic words speak this day. We might feel that things are spinning out of control and are beyond redemption, but Christ speaks words of hope.

With the shades of truth wide open we can see where we have been and where we are going. We can see that things are bad but Christ promises that God is with us and that one day in their place we will see the Son of God, lovingly returning to call us all home.

Even as the trees' buds tell us that spring is near we can rest assured that the fearful things of this world will not have the last word.

What we as apocalyptic people need to do is to watch for the sovereign presence of God working in our lives and in our world.ⁱⁱⁱ This is what we do in Advent. Because we are situated in between the two Advents of Christ: the Advent that was long ago in Bethlehem and the Advent that is yet to be.

In the meantime, with the shades up on the woes and weariness of the world – the woes and weariness of our own souls Jesus urges us to be watchful. We need always to be living in the kingdom ways Jesus showed us. Because not only is Jesus' final Advent always potentially imminent, the fact is that even short of that grand event, we already live every moment in the presence of the living Christ who through us is paving the way for that time when God will make all things new.

So, let us march into this Advent season, fully aware of where we are going and fully aware of where we have been so that we might live with hope, confident of Christ's abiding presence.

ⁱ From "Alert in the Abyss" a sermon by Susan R. Andrews found on textweek.com

ⁱⁱ From William H. Willimon in Pulpit Resource. Page 46 ~ Nov. 27, 2005

The Rev. Eric Dillenbeck, M.D.V.