

Advent 1-B-Isaiah64Mark 13-2014

Texts: Is 64: 1-9; Mark 13: 24-37 and Mark 14: 26-31

Yet However but: learning to look

Last week we heard the astonishing story of the Sheep and the Goats, the Son of Man saying that if we want to find God, maybe we should look in the prison cell, or under a bridge, or at Out of the Cold. The surprised listeners ask: "When did we see you naked, or hungry, or out in the cold. . . ."

That parable leaves us wondering if we know anything at all.

We are left realizing that we are only beginning to see who Jesus was and who the risen Christ is. We are left a little humbled, a little perplexed, and maybe also a little comforted, because the Son of Man is with us when **we** are naked , imprisoned. . .

Nothing to do with this sermon, I happened to be reading this week about Jesus' last night with his disciples: "You will all fall away" Jesus says to them, in his usual matter-of-fact way. There is no drama to the statement. It's not "You horrible low-down no good disciples, you are going to desert me in my most desperate hour!" No, rather it is a gentle recognition of who we are as human beings. The disciples do not want to be recognized for who they are/will be, though. They protest: "We will never desert you."

"Oh yes you will," says Jesus, "**HOWEVER**, I will go before you to Galilee, and meet you there." So there is this recognition of our "sinfulness" (we will fall away) but the story does not end there. There is the graceful twist: "**however**" The graceful twist is not, (did you notice?): all your failings will be covered by my sacrifice on the cross." No. The graceful twist is that the risen Christ will go before us and meet us. The graceful twist is that Christ does not desert us, because he knows our weakness, and accepts it, and moves with us on our journey as our eyes slowly open and our hearts broken and reformed.

Maybe we want a more dramatic solution than Christ just "being with us". That is the truth of it. When we are in a bad way, we want dramatic powerful rescue scenarios. It is not only our grandchildren or younger friends who want super-heroes, transformers and the like. We do too, and you might say that we have good reason to want them.

If we lived in Missouri, whether black or white, but likely moreso if we were black, we might well want to take up the cry of Isaiah 64: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" Maybe we would add our own details: that the whole nation would quake at your presence, the whole judicial system, that God might just tear out the not so subtle embedded racism that leaves young black men poor and unemployed and angry and scared for their lives. This is the cry of the sore afraid, the tired, outraged at being told over and over again, in so many ways: You don't belong. You are less."

If we were a family in Syria, If we lived in the Ukraine, or Iguala, Mexico

If we were at the market in Maiduguri, Nigeria this week,

If we lived in Sierra Leone, or Guinea or Liberia, If we lived in S Sudan,

If we lived on a 1<sup>st</sup> nations land in Labrador and our community just buried yet another teenager from suicide, we might well cry out: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

If we lived in 6<sup>th</sup> century Palestine, and had just journeyed back from Babylon to find our temple in rubble, our city wall a ruin;

If we lived in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, and just came across another "tax booth" set up by the Romans, so that we have to pay a foreigner to be able to walk along the road that our ancestors have walked for

centuries, we might well cry out: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

If we were Presbyterians in 2014, and had just read the Haynes report, or the Hamilton Spectator, and it finally became painfully obvious that what we have known all our lives, the bedrock of our existence, the foundation of everything, the church, is not going to be the same as it always has been, If we saw that there is no "forever and ever" for what we have always known, would we cry out for God to just DO SOMETHING, to show up, to reach down and shake a few people back to their senses? I once saw a Presbyterian shake his fist at the cars driving by on a Sunday morning, not stopping to come in to worship. "What is wrong with them?" he cried.

When people are in crisis, they want a god who will come down, in power and might and slay (or at least shake hard) the enemies, and make things right again.

Isaiah prays the prayer of a people for whom God seems to be absent: "Where are you, God? Where are you?" (Paul Neuchterlain).

What if God hears the cry

Accepts the cry

And does come down,

But not in the way any of us expected or wanted?

Jesus faces the enemies of his day with no gun or missile or armored tank or even shaking fist (metaphorically-speaking). He faces them and their violence, and the only solution he offers is "see you in Galilee".

Who is this God we follow?

What is this "salvation" offered?

We build these scenarios and think we know God's plan: to shake the heavens and make the stars fall, , or do something equally "supernatural"

However . . . . But . . . Yet

Even in the Old Testament, even before Jesus,

The answer comes quietly

The answer comes gently

The answer comes maybe only after we have done with our fuming and raging and yelling and crying out: "Yet

You are our Father;

We are the clay

You are our potter

We are all the work of your hand . . . We are all your people."

The word "yet" marks the turning point, the opening of the grace: we are God's people; we are held in God's ever-creative hands. The gospel is : God will never stop creating with us.

The real coming is the very reverse of an apocalyptic, dramatic appearance.

In Mark 13 we hear Jesus recount the expectation of how God is "supposed to come": with the sun darkened, the moon failing to give light, the stars falling and the powers in the heavens shaken. And then he goes on to say that the coming will be like a man who goes on a journey, and encouraging the doorkeeper to be ON THE WATCH. , to keep awake, to learn how to look, and where, for we do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn.

We know what happened next: Jesus proceeded to hand himself over: he hands himself over to God in the Last Supper in the evening; at midnight he hands himself over to Judas' betraying hands; at cockcrow Peter deserts him and in the morning he faces the Romans. The master of the house is already present among them, for those who have eyes to see. [Is this reference to the man going on the journey Jesus' subtle way of saying "yet, however, but"?]

Jesus, with steady gaze, knowing from where he comes and to where he goes, knowing who he is in God, offers to us, in the face of great upheaval and uncertainty, a way through, a gentle steady "non-emergency" salvation: we are held in the hands of a God who says: "I will not forsake the work of my hands" and says: "See you in Galilee, see you at MacNab, see you in Johnson Hall, see you on Main St, see you ..... exactly where you are not expecting me. You can maybe only see the hopeless destruction of what you have known

However          Yet          But

Keep awake! Watch! Look! I am there! I am already there. I am waiting for you."  
That's what Jesus says. Can we see it? Can we find the eyes to see?

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian, Hamilton, ON by Rev Cathy Stewart With some help from James Alison's essay *Contemplation in a world of violence* (Chapter 1 in *On Being Liked*)