

NOVEMBER 30, 2014: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT  
Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7 I Corinthians 1:3-9 Mark 13:14-16

We all can identify with Third-Isaiah's request today that Yahweh "rend the heavens and come down." It's difficult facing life without God being a physical part of that life. "You, Yahweh, are our father," the prophet proclaims. "We are the clay and you the potter; we are all the work of your hands." Given that relationship, it certainly would be nice if you were around when we need you.

Yet there might be some occasions when we prefer God not to be deeply embedded in our lives. "Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds are like polluted rags . . ." In other words, maybe it's not a bad thing that God is looking at us from a distance.

No doubt the fear of God coming at the wrong time in the wrong place is why Mark's Jesus tells his people, "Be watchful! Be alert!" The evangelist is still expecting Jesus' Second Coming to take place during his and his community's lifetime. At this point, expecting an imminent Parousia is almost an essential part of the Christian faith. But Mark shares Third-Isaiah's fear. "You do not know when the time will come. . . . May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping."

Paul, writing at least ten years before Mark, also believes Jesus' Parousia is just around the corner. Yet he's little more confident than the evangelist that the Corinthians will be busy doing the right things when the risen Jesus arrives. "He (God) will keep you firm to the end," he writes, "irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." His confidence revolves around his belief that no one in the Corinthian church is "lacking in any spiritual gift." Those special gifts of the Spirit are the down payment on Jesus' promise of eternal life for his followers.

But those familiar with I Corinthians know one of the reasons Paul writes this particular letter is to confront the misuse of those gifts. Some in the church are employing them for their own benefit instead of for the benefit of the community. Instead of unifying the church, they're splitting it into factions. In the mind and experience of Paul, there's no more serious Christian sin.

It must have amazed the Apostle that God's presence, rooted in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, was so lightly regarded by some who had received them. Those misguided Christians forgot they were members of the Body of Christ. Their faith was their own personal business. If God were to rend the heavens and come down, it was to meet their needs, not the needs of the community.

The historical Jesus always stressed that God is present, working effectively in our lives. But he also stressed that in order to experience that presence, we had to go through a "metanoia:" a total change in our value system. Such a repentance helped his followers put others and their needs before their own; to die and rise as Jesus died and rose, by giving themselves to others.

Paul never wanted his people to take their eyes off Jesus' Parousia. But he also never wanted them to take their eyes off the presence of the risen Jesus right here and now. Though today we'd say he was disappointed that Jesus' Second Coming never happened in his lifetime, he certainly wasn't disappointed in the presence of the risen Jesus among us, especially in the Body of Christ. Wouldn't it be nice to wake up one day and realize that what we're expecting in the future is already here . . . if we know what to look for?

Best we stay awake.

## DECEMBER 7, 2014: SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11    II Peter 3:8-14    Mark 1:1-8

The best help to correctly understanding the liturgical readings employed during this time of year is to realize that none of our sacred authors had Christmas in mind when they composed them.

Deutero-Isaiah, for instance, not only knew nothing about Christmas, he knew nothing about Jesus of Nazareth. Active during the 530s BCE – the last years of the Babylonian Exile – the main goal of his oracles is to prepare his people for their return to the Promised Land.

Today's first reading contains his first words. "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated." Beaten down by fifty years of exile, most Israelites threw in the towel years before, giving up any hope of ever returning to the land of their parents and grandparents. Yet now this stranger has appeared on the scene, telling them to prepare the road between Babylon and Jerusalem. There's going to be a new Exodus, and they're going to be part of it.

They're no longer to look at Yahweh as a vindictive God. Now, "like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care." What a turnabout! The things they'd been anticipating for several generations are now just around the corner.

Of course, there's a reason so many of the prophet's exiled community refused to believe his consoling words. "How," they demanded to know, "can you be so certain Yahweh's going to get us out of here?" Deutero-Isaiah simply responds, "The mouth of Yahweh has spoken." We have God's word on it.

Sort of reminds me of a scene in that classic 70s film *O God*. After George Burns (God) gives John Denver a list of the things he's supposed to tell the powers that be, Denver wants to know how he can assure these people that this list actually comes from God. "No problem," Burns replies. "Just show them my card." Whereupon he hands Denver a calling card with just one word printed on it: "God." I presume Deutero-Isaiah could easily have identified with John Denver. Is having God's word enough of a guarantee that what God has said will actually be carried out?

The author of II Peter, writing in the first years of the second Christian century believes it is. Though most of his fellow Christians gave up looking for Jesus' Parousia years before, he's still holding out hope that those "new heavens and new earth" are just a few years down the road. The risen Jesus is simply more patient than his disciples. If Jesus promised he'd come back, he'll come back.

In a similar way, Mark's John the Baptist is willing to risk his life to deliver God's word about the imminent start of Jesus' public ministry. Though people are coming from miles around "to be baptized by him in the Jordan River," he wants them to look forward to one who "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In some sense, he's saying, "Based on God's word, the best is still to come."

Instead of concentrating on Christmas, perhaps it would be better today to concentrate on the word of God Jesus proclaimed. After all, as his disciples, we're committed to proclaim that same word. When he finally appears in the gospel, he announces, "God's kingdom is close at hand!" How do we know God's present and working effectively in our daily lives? I have no doubt the historical Jesus would respond to that question with a simple, "God has said it."

If God's word is good enough for Jesus, it should be good enough for us.

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