

With Power and Glory  
Isaiah 64:1-4, Mark 13:24-37  
November 29, 2020  
First Presbyterian Church  
First Advent B

### **Isaiah 64:1-4**

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—  
as 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!  
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
From 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.

### **Mark 13:24-37**

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

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

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

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

## Sermon

Well, it's that time of year, my friends... when the days are getting shorter and the nights longer... when folks who don't drive after dark have to be home before 5:00... when I'm reading a book in the evening and my eyes get heavy and it feels like midnight, but it's only 7:30.

Have you ever thought how strange it is  
that the most hopeful festival of the Christian year  
begins in the darkest season?

And another strange thing –  
that according to the way the church tells time,  
this First Sunday of Advent  
marks the beginning of the new year.

With one candle lit, we are reminded  
that we operate on a different timetable  
from the rest of the world.

There are plenty of other calendars that shape our time –  
school calendars and fiscal calendars and national calendars...  
all of them with their own values and concerns.

But the Christian calendar – the one we begin today –  
focuses on the life of Christ and what his life tells us  
about our own lives with God.<sup>1</sup>

And one of those things the Christian calendar tells us  
is that our year begins in the dark...?  
and that it will get darker before it gets light.

With the end of daylight savings time in October,  
nighttime begins to take over.

And by the time the earth rounds the bend on December 21,  
it is the shortest day of the year; barely nine hours long.

So, this is one thing our calendar teaches us –  
week by week we will light new candles,  
but even as we light them the darkness will increase.

We know that the sun  
will eventually come back and the days will lengthen...  
just like we begin Advent knowing that God will be born  
in Bethlehem cave.

These are sure facts of our lives  
and we can count on them.

But so is waiting in the dark.

And anyone who has ever crouched in a foxhole  
or laid in a hospital bed hungering for the morning  
knows that:

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "With Power and Great Glory" in (Cowley), p. 133-4

the morning will come... the light will appear...  
but it will not be rushed.  
It will not be rushed... and our job is to wait without losing hope.  
This is what Jesus told his disciples  
in our reading this morning from Mark's Gospel.  
There were only four of them (the inner circle)  
– Peter, John, Andrew, and James.  
It was these four who were the first  
to put down what they were doing and follow him.  
They had just walked with Jesus to the Mount of Olives  
and sat down with him there.  
They were looking across the Kidron Valley  
at the great walled city of Jerusalem –  
the enormous temple crowning it at its highest point.  
Jesus had told them that the whole place  
would come tumbling down one day soon...  
they asked him when they should expect this to happen...  
and that's when he told them to keep their eyes open  
for stars falling from heaven,  
for the darkening of the sun and the moon,  
and for the snatching up of the elect  
from the ends of the earth.  
Keep your eyes open, he said,  
"You will see me, the Son of Man,  
coming in clouds with great power and glory."  
Now, he didn't say these things to frighten them,  
as some believe.  
He said these things to comfort them...  
to make sure they knew that even something as frightening  
as the end of the world was in God's good hands.  
So that when the stars had fallen  
and every light in the sky was extinguished,  
they could remember what he told them –  
they could remember that it was God  
who created both light and darkness...  
and that God is still sovereign over them...  
and that they were to watch – watch even in the darkness –  
for his coming to them in the clouds.

This week I learned of two resources I didn't know about before... the first is a website called [raptureready.com](http://raptureready.com). According to its author, the site is like the Dow Jones Industrial Average for end of time activity. The index is like a prophetic speedometer—the higher the number the faster we're moving towards the end times, which according to some will surely begin

with the “rapture” of all righteous believers from the face of the earth. In case you were wondering what these end-times watchers have to say about our 2020 status, as of Friday we are currently scoring at a high of 182 points... (which is well above the 160-point threshold at which Christians need to “fasten their seat belts” because of what is happening in the world. The index quantifies events like wars, famine, disasters, global turmoil, false prophets, interest rates, unemployment, and plagues to name a few. And you should know that the category of plagues has currently been maxed out by COVID-19!

The thing is - most of us don’t need a “rapture ready index” to know that there’s a lot going on in our world... and that we could really use some help! And in that sense we join countless Christians across the ages who have looked around them and reached the conclusion that Christ’s return was imminent... Christians who have wrestled with what to do and how to live in the now while keeping faith and hope in what will be.<sup>2</sup>

Well, according to Jesus, our job is to watch – not to watch out for fear of getting zapped, but to watch – to stay alert, to pay attention, so that we are not snoozing when the master comes home. There are at least three different ways that Christians have gone about this job of watching in the past. There’s the “Raptureready.com” way of looking for the literal end of the world. There are books and videos and websites aplenty that spell out the whole mathematical formulae in the Book of Revelation... and advise us on how to be at just the right place at just the right time for the rapture. The only problem with this approach is that it claims to know what Jesus himself didn’t claim to know. “But of that day or that hour no one knows,” he says, “not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Even Jesus didn’t know when it would happen.

Another way Christians have watched and waited for the end is by letting the awareness of the end times motivate them to do Christ’s work in the present... to heighten their commitment to people and the issues of the day. I’ve shared this story before... but in colonial New England a meeting of state legislators was suddenly plunged into darkness by a solar eclipse... and as the world turned dark around them many of those present panicked and moved to adjourn. But one of them stood up and said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear as fools. And if it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, let candles be brought.” We watch for the end by doubling down on doing Christ’s work in the present.

And then the third way to watch for the end is to suspect that there is not just ONE end of the world... just as there is not the only coming of Christ. When Jesus died, his disciples and followers thought the world had ended. When Jerusalem fell and the Emperor Nero swooped down on the fledgling church like a vulture, they believed the world had ended. And the truth is that the world can end any day of the week – with a declaration of war... or the death of spouse... the death a child... or a deadly pandemic.

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<sup>2</sup> “Keeping Watch for God” Advent 1B November 29, 2020 Rev. Courtney Allen Crump, Grace Baptist Church, Richmond, VA., found on A Sermon for Every Sunday

And when any of those things happen, the truth is that watching for Christ's coming again can become the only light in such dark times. With the sun and moon and stars snuffed out, watching for Christ's coming again in power and glory can become the light that illumines the darkness.

I mentioned earlier that this week I learned of TWO resources I didn't know about before – the first being the website Raptureready.com (which I will not be visiting often) ... and the second is an Advent creed of sorts, (which I WILL be visiting often). Written by South African pastor and anti-apartheid activist, Allan Boesak, these words remind us of the truth that God is loose in the world, no matter what else may be happening. And it calls us to keep awake, to be present, and to pay attention to what is true about God and about you and me this Advent and in all times:

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss— This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death, and destruction—This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever - This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world— This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers - This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history - This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So, let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From *Walking on Thorns*, by Allan Boesak, Eerdmans, 2004, as quoted by Rev. Crump in her sermon.