

I hope you had a wonderful Thanksgiving last week. My family and I also had a refreshing time. The day before Thanksgiving, although it was a rainy day, we went on a picnic at a park in Marin County and had a good time cooking out under a pavilion; on Thanksgiving Day, we also had wonderful food and fellowship with my cousin's family in San Jose.

One thing I noticed over the weekend was that while we are still in November, no matter where you go, you feel like you are already in Christmas time. I cannot believe that we have only one month left for the year. Plus, I just turned 50; I never thought this moment would come this quick! One thing is clear: ready or not, time moves fast. Clocks tick and things move on.

Yes, time goes fast; our time on the planet runs out every second. But we continue to do what we have to do with hope; especially as Christians, we need to look ahead with a positive spirit; we wake up every morning in faith and go to bed at night with thanksgiving.

Even though we have many challenges in our lives, we tell the world that we are always hopeful, not because the way things are but because we have God who is with us, because we have hope in God's promise.

According to the church calendar, the first Sunday of Advent is New Year's Day. And on this liturgical New Year's Day, the scripture lessons we are given are quite symbolic ones.

First of all, I am amazed with the spiritual insight that the prophet Isaiah had. According to scholars, Is. 64 was written some time after Israelites were taken into Babylonian exile. Surrounded and captured by foreign powers, the people of Israel did not see any way out in their future. Things were looking bad; everyone felt that they were abandoned by God; so many people turned their backs on God. As verse 7 says "There was no one who called on God." They thought God had hidden His face from them; they thought it was God who had given them into the hands of the enemy.

But that didn't mean they really forgot about God; it was rather their plea to God for help in their dire situation; they were asking God's immediate intervention into their lives and get them out of their agony.

"O God, tear open the heavens and come down!" said Isaiah, "So that the mountains would quake at your presence." "O God, come and make your name known to your enemies, so that they might tremble at your presence!"

I think it was when I was 10 years old or so. My mother passed out at home; she just fell down and lost consciousness. Back then, we had no telephone, no car, and no hospital nearby, just nothing in a small village in Korea.

What would you do as a ten-year-old? I was just devastated. To me, my mother was everything; shocked, I came out of my house and ran. No, even though I was trying to run as fast as I could, I couldn't; my

legs and feet didn't move fast enough. I was heading to a friend's house because though his father was not quite a doctor, he was someone who could do something for my mother. It was about three or four blocks away; but when I ran, it felt like three miles away; and when I arrived at my friend's home, I couldn't talk; I could not explain why I was there; the situation was so dire and overwhelming to me, I couldn't open my mouth; I couldn't say, “help.” Instead, I just cried standing there. Eventually my friend's father came and resuscitated my mother. It was 40 years ago; but I still remember those moments: the moments of urgency.

In Mark's text, people had that kind of urgency. For the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish people, the Jerusalem Temple was everything; it was more than just a temple; it was their foundation of life; it was what made them who they were; and one day they saw the house of God come down by the hand of the Romans; to them, it was way more than the destruction of World Trade Center on 9/11. And here you are. Upon the collapse of Jerusalem Temple around 70, the whole Jewish community in Mark's church felt that it was the end of the world.

There was no greater pain or sense of failure whatsoever for those Christians.

Plus, their lives were in danger because of their fellow Jewish people; simply because they were followers of Christ, many Jews gave their peers hard times by handing them over to the Roman officials for

persecution. It was the darkest time of the early Christian church. Imagine being mugged or killed simply because you are Christian!

Right then comes Mark who says: "Christians, keep awake! The Lord is coming; He is near!"

"The Sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven...but you will see the Son of Man coming in clouds. He will send out his angels and gather his elect. Keep awake!"

He is near! He is right at the door! "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Be alert!

Mark was telling his church that God's hands were within reach! Preacher Isaiah was telling his people that God would break into their time as helper any minute!

So to those who were going through unbelievable pain and suffering, the coming of the Lord was nothing but hope. The Messiah had to come; the Son of Man was the only one who would rescue them; God's direct intervention was the only hope they could think of.

In this Advent season, I feel the same sort of urgency: the urgency of God's immediate intervention in our midst.

My only prayer is: "O God, come down to us." "O, Lord, come near us." I don't find hope any other way.

We just heard last week that more than 190 innocent people were killed in India. The question is why? What's wrong with these people? Can you imagine what those hostages went through when they were held up in the hotel rooms? O God, come to us!

If I was part of one of the victim's family, I would have said: "God, tear open the heavens and come down now!" O God, please show us you are here! Now; you have to come now! Now, not later!

I am not supposed to tell you this. But I just want to tell you a little bit: I am still on jury duty; last week the prosecutor said the defendant on the trial shot another man because he just thought the other guy had to go; just a simple reason- he thought the other man had to go; so he shot him to death! Can you believe this?

So what do we do with these people? Do we lock up all these kids? Is that all? But they say we ran out of rooms in prisons? What do we do? O God, come and help us!

Some time ago, I saw a lady on TV who tied herself with a rope to her door rail on the house saying "No one would take my house from me even though I lost it to foreclosure." In this case, what can you do? Her prayer would be: "God, please come down and help me!"

Now, we have people out of jobs, people out of food, and people out of clothes. Our prayers for them are: God, where are you? Please come and help these people.

We are all desperate. "O God," we say, "Tear open the heavens and come down to us."

"Lord, come and help us!"

That's our cries and that is our prayers.

But when we cry out and ask for help, God is also crying out to us:

"Folks, before you ask me to tear open the heavens; you tear open your heart! You come close to me! Wake up! Keep Awake!"

In fact, I have come down to you in the person of my Son Jesus. And now I am with you in the presence of my Spirit.

Keep alert! Do what I have asked you to do!

That's what I hear now!

"I may not be able to give back to you the house you are losing now; I may not give you cash you need. But I am more concerned about you, your life, your spiritual welfare, and your eternal life."

"See what is more important to you! Wake up!"

Jesus says, "I have been around you quite a long time to teach and remind you of this but you have not listened to me; you have not really changed!"

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37; "He Is Near"; 11/30/08; 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent; Albany UMC

“Now, it is time for you to be alert!” Be ready; I am coming to you. I cannot tell you exactly when. But I will be there soon to settle the accounts with you.”

That is what I hear from the Lord this morning. He is coming; clock is ticking; and He is near.

So let us wake up and be alert! Amen