

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Advent 1B, 12/3/2017, Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37  
(Elizabeth Felicetti)

Advent FINALLY begins today. Because the fourth Sunday of Advent falls on Christmas eve this year, this is the latest possible start for the season. Thank goodness Advent is finally here, because many of us claim that Advent is our favorite season of the church year. Our culture may be singing "Deck the halls," but our Old Testament reading this morning laments that "All our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf." Our Old Testament reading cries out to God, "There 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."

Why is this our favorite season, again?

Don't look to the New Testament for relief: "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken."

Happy holidays!

Advent is a separate season from Christmas, as we faithful Episcopalians are well aware. Advent is a season of longing and expectation. We are not only expecting the baby Jesus on Christmas, but we await his second coming.

You might be a little sick already of hearing about the second coming, given that we talked about it the past three weeks as we looked at those last parables in Matthew. Today we turn to a new church year, and the Gospel of Mark. But no matter which Gospel we read, Advent is all about longing.

What do you long for? What is your dream?

Last Tuesday, I was out of the office for mandatory clergy conference. This year most of us didn't mind so much that it was mandatory, because our speaker was the Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. If you have seen any video clips of our Presiding Bishop, you know that he is an incredible speaker, deeply energized about Jesus. I felt like I was actually sitting not in diocesan clergy conference but at a bobblehead convention, because everyone in the room was nodding along with everything Bishop Curry said. I found this supremely annoying, but I also found myself bobbing and smiling along with everyone else.

Bishop Curry inspired me to dig out a book I've had for at least fifteen years: *The Dream of God* by Verna Dozier. He spoke about that book and God's dream for us a lot last Tuesday.

Verna Dozier is an Episcopalian unafraid to challenge our institutional church. She writes about how we humans mess things up and move away from God's dream for us, but again and again, God calls us to return.

Dozier writes about three falls: not just “The Fall” we Christians refer to as Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. That was the first one. Through them, we chose to move away from the dream God had for us. Don’t eat this one thing—and so, that’s what we went for. That one thing we weren’t supposed to eat.

Are you like that? Do you want that one thing you aren’t supposed to have?

In this season of longing, what do you long for?

The second fall, as Dozier sees it, was the decision to have kings. Now that we are in Year B, our Old Testament readings will focus on that, especially after Pentecost. God warned the Israelites about the bad things that would happen if they were ruled by kings. It never goes well with kings. But kings were what the people longed for. They wanted kings, because all the other nations had them. Enough with this judge stuff.

They rejected God’s dream.

Dozier sees the third fall as Constantine, that is, the early church aligning with the state, Rome. Once the religion became official instead of renegade, a subgroup turned to monasticism, as some of the faithful protested their faith becoming institutionalized.

I’m enjoying delving into *The Dream of God* in Advent, and wondering about God’s dream for us, and how we turn away from that dream, again and again. We try to control things. Wait, you don’t want us to eat that fruit? What, it will make us as smart as you? Hand it over, serpent. We want kings; we don’t care what you say, God. And practicing an unimportant religion is hard: we want Christianity to be official.

Today is a new church year, the first Sunday of Advent. What’s your new-year resolution? What is your dream? What do you long for?

Today’s reading from Isaiah—and by the way, Bishop Curry claimed that Isaiah was Jesus’ favorite prophet, so it’s probably true—today’s reading from Isaiah is a lament. The prophet cries out for God to tear open the heavens and come down. Where is God, this piece of Scripture cries out. You have hidden your face from us.

Does it feel that way to anyone else today? Where is God, with those back to back hurricanes? Where is God, when people are murdered in a country music festival or their house of worship? Where is God, with all these men we admired being accused of abusing women?

The next verses, which were not part of our reading so are not in your insert, help us to understand what’s going on in today’s Isaiah passage. Verse 10 reads, “Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation.”

The Babylonians had conquered the kingdom. Having kings didn’t save God’s people. They had been conquered, and part of Isaiah was written sometime either when the people were still in

exile, or at least before the second temple was rebuilt. It was a time when everything seemed to be in ruins, and they longed for God.

Oh that you would tear down open the heavens and come down.

Advent is a beginning. The year for us here in church does not begin on January first, but today. We're invited to ponder the second coming, to envision a different world.

As we envision this different world, let's try not to create a fourth "fall." Look to Scripture for God's dream for us. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Spend some time in this new year wondering about God's dream, not just our dreams, based on what we are told we can't have, or what our neighbors and friends have that we covet. What does God dream for us?

This Advent, dream about the baby Jesus, about the beautiful story of God becoming flesh, choosing to be born from a human mother, Mary. And, dream about a world where Christ comes again, and restores us to God's dream. As you prepare your homes for the holidays, prepare your hearts for Jesus, not just the gurgling baby Jesus, but the Jesus who will come in glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead.

When Jesus comes, will he find you awake, living God's dream?