

Isaiah 64:1-9

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...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. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13:24-27

"But 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. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. 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... "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 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. 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

“Strength for the Journey”

Waiting can be really tough. I'm not talking about a five-minute wait in line at the store or waiting for a traffic light to change. The tough waits are the ones when we are waiting on some unknown that will impact our future. Like test results from a doctor, an admittance letter from a college, to recover from an illness or a response from a prospective employer when one is out of work. Waiting on the unknown is unnerving!

Each of today's texts addresses an aspect of waiting. Israel cries out for an end to oppression and for God's presence to be with them again. Paul encourages the Corinthians in regards to the day of Jesus' return. And in Mark Jesus instructs his disciples on how to wait for his return. These texts show God's people waiting in anticipation and hope for God's return!

Some of you know I am a National Public Radio fan. Once in awhile I catch the show “A Prairie Home Companion” hosted by Garrison Keillor. My favorite part of that show is always Keillor’s stories about the latest happenings in Lake Wobegon. Each week, Keillor tells a story about Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, a fictitious town that transcends time and place. He often brings faith, especially Lutheranism, into his stories and pokes at his own faith in a good-natured way. I remember hearing Keillor tell a story about his family’s faith and Thanksgiving holidays during his early years. “During Thanksgiving, we gave thanks for Advent in my house. No, not the Advent you are thinking of! Not the one with a baby in a manger, and trees, and presents, and a shining star over an inn. My family gave thanks for Jesus’ Second Advent—the one out ahead of us—the one where he will return and judge us. We gave thanks for God’s Second Advent. My family looked forward to the coming of the judgment day!”

The audience laughed at Keillor’s gloom and doom tone. It clashed with his description of the family’s joyful thanksgiving over a religious subject most of us are wary of thinking about for too long. But, as far as faithful discipleship during Advent goes, Keillor hit the nail squarely on the head. He knows that during the first Sunday in Advent the lectionary takes us away from the babe in the manger. He knows that most of us get nervous about this departure. During the first week of Advent we are told to remember our hope in Christ in a backwards fashion. The lectionary forces us to look at our lives in the here-and-now in light of what God has yet to do.

In this respect, we are in a similar position to the disciples Jesus was teaching in Mark. Mark tells us that Jesus taught trust. He taught trust in God by showing his trust in God telling his disciples, “About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father ... Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come!”

Unfortunately fear is the initial reaction of many Christians today to the imperative commands which are linked to the “day and hour” of Jesus’ return. But these commands are nothing to fear! This passage was understood by early believers as encouragement to hope in God as they sought to live their lives in faith. Like Jesus, his disciples are to base their lives and actions on their hope in God every day no matter what circumstances surround them. Frederick Buechner, a writer and minister, gives us another clue about what it means to keep awake. “The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens.”<sup>1</sup> Every day and every hour we are allowed to live in extraordinary fashion. This fashion shows itself forth when we live each day in the hope God has already given us.

Keeping awake means living our lives in light of our hope that God, who has already conquered death for us, will return to wipe out evil, disease, war, poverty, famine, physical pain, and mental anguish. We are to live in light of the certainty that Christ’s grace is sufficient to see us through our lives unto his return as just Judge.

God gives us strength for the journey by sharing the finale of God’s story of salvation with us! And this is a story meant to spread hope, not fear. Knowing how things will end, as we do, changes how we look at and live the rest of our story. Do we look to the future with hope or fear?

No matter how dark our lives seem Jesus always assured his disciples of God's promises. Just as the darkness did not overcome the light in Jesus' first Advent, hope in Christ assures us that God's Light is with us now and will conquer all darkness in the future. At Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis there was small chapel that had in its chancel an illumined Bible that lay on the communion table. The Bible lay beneath a single light that shone upon it night and day. No one ever turned off that light, not visitors, or ministers or the custodial staff. When every other light in the church was off, you could look through the chapel doors and glimpse a vision, the Word of God shining in the darkness. We could see before us what we profess we believe! That image is etched in my mind forever and it gives me strength in times of distress.

Earlier I said that waiting can be tough and that the toughest waits are the ones where we are waiting out the unknown. The people Israel were suffering a long wait under oppression in exile when they cried out to God "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand." They didn't know exactly when their wait would end—but in the face of the unknown, they prayed tear open the heavens O God, and return to us! While we will never be sure of the particulars of our lives, our ultimate destiny is not UNKNOWN. The sun may darken, the moon may cease to give light, the stars may seem as though they are falling from heaven! All that we know may seem utterly shaken. But what God has begun, God will bring to completion. We are awake and alert when we live out our belief that our ultimate destiny lies securely with God.

God gives us strength for the journey by sharing the completion of our story of salvation with us. Not to scare us or to make us respond out of fear but to encourage us! The One who will stand as Judge, the One who will return, is none other than the One who gave his life for the world. Any fears we have about Jesus' return are soothed and washed away through faith. Remember Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians, "You are not lacking any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (HarperSanFrancisco: San Francisco, 1993) 2.