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Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37

Isn't it strange that, to get ready for Christmas, the Advent lectionary gives us a reading about the apocalypse:

the end of the world – destruction and darkness, stars falling,
and Jesus riding the clouds
and sending angels to gather us up with the winds.

I'm not sure this is what the lectionary creators intended, but for some reason, he reminds me of Santa Claus, riding his sleigh through the wind and the darkness...!

Scriptures that talk about the end of the world in great destruction are strange and somewhat disturbing to me.

But I think, really, they are about great longing – longing for Jesus to come back, perhaps like Santa Claus, to bring peace and joy back to a world that seems dark and empty and waiting.

But the comparison between apocalyptic Jesus and Santa mostly ends there. Yes, both ride in through the darkness and sneak into our houses or our world, and “no one knows the hour,”

But Santa leaves gifts and eats the cookies we leave him,

and apocalyptic Jesus comes and breaks into pieces all the powers of evil and war that humans beings have created, and creates a whole new world.

Isaiah is also looking to the heavens for God to come in the night and save his people. He asks:

O that you would tear open the heavens and COME DOWN...

The Jewish people have returned home from 50 years of exile in Babylon (which is now Iraq). And still even after they moved back home, to everything they thought they could want,

The prophet Isaiah looks out over his community and sees people who are making themselves miserable, people who are acting selfishly, people who don't seem to understand that they are children of God:

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.

And Isaiah blames God's absence:

you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

What does the absence of God feel like?

I think it is a pretty common feeling.

God can feel irrelevant, God can feel distant, God can feel hidden.

What is God up to when almost 200 people get shot in Mumbai,

or a man gets trampled by a bunch of people who are trying to prepare to celebrate the birth of his Son, Jesus?

Where is God?

you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

We can have no idea what God is doing in our lives,
when we go through great loss or disappointment,
when we don't know what we're supposed to do next,
when prayer doesn't come easily, or we're watching someone we love struggle with something that we can't do anything to help them with.

We say so often that Advent is about waiting,
but I wonder if it might be more accurate to say that it is about longing.
(*Perhaps* longing for Christmas presents. They are certainly symbols of what we are really longing for... and maybe that's why we get bored with them so quickly.)

We long for the real feeling of God's presence in our lives.

We long for true joy and healing.

We long for the Creation that God intended for this world:

a world of beauty, anticipation, creativity, and love.

Maybe we long for a God who will come in the night,
who will tear open the heavens and come down into our lives?

Who will be unmistakably present with us.

Who will tell us what we need to know.

Who will make the world a better place, right in front of us.

Lawns everywhere are filling up with reindeer, candy canes, Santas, nativity scenes, and lights, set against the cold and the long winter nights.

Because this is the season we all choose to believe in hope – light set against the dark.

Where we choose to believe in the love and presence of God among us, in the midst of what can seem like God's absence.

Isaiah turns from blaming and begging God for relief
to giving himself over to God:

**Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand**

God is with us,

but how do we choose to be with God?

We are the ones who can choose open ourselves to God's love, or to shut our hearts.

We are the ones who can choose to be shaped by God's presence:

through prayer, works of mercy, hospitality, keeping Sabbath, maybe even by putting up Christmas lights, and by other spiritual practices...

And so, we can become like clay in God's hands – shaped into who God is longing for *us* to be.

Because God longs for us, too.

We hear Paul tell the Corinthians, just as he might tell us:

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.

We have been given every gift we need to behold the revealing of Christ in our own lives and hearts.

We are the work of God's hand.

We have hope that God is at work in the world, even when God seems absent.

Let us keep awake, not just on Christmas night, but through all of Advent, and every night of our lives, to the coming of Christ among us.

Amen.