

'ADVENT SURPRISE'

Isaiah 64:1-9; 1st Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:32-37

December 3, 2017 -- 1st of Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9

64:1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- 64:2 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! 64:3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 64:4 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.

64:5 You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

64:6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 64:7 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. 64:8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. 64:9 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

1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 1:4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, 1:5 for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- 1:6 just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-- 1:7 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1:8 He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1:9 God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13:24-37

13:24 "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 13:25 and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 13:26 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. 13:27 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. 13:28 "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. 13:29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 13:30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 13:31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 13:32 "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 13:33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 13:34 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. 13:35 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, 13:36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 13:37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

SURPRISE!! How are you with surprise? Some people really don't like surprises. They want to know or at least be reasonably sure about what's happening at all or most of the time. They're not all that into spontaneity and don't think it's fun for them to spring something on them – they don't like. Let's plan it.

Then there are the other bunch who are driven crazy by the mundane and the scheduled and the calendar. Just try to shock them – they love it. Want to make them happy – a surprise party is great.

People who know such things would probably tell us that this is a left or right brain dominant kind of thing. People love sports events because, despite all the statistics and league records, we still never really know what's going to happen and who's going to win. Other people watch and become anxious wrecks because it's all so uncertain. “Just tell me who won! – I'm gonna see some familiar old movie.”

Of course there are surprises no one likes – we've created a whole industry, and the truth is a whole economy to insulate our lives from the unexpected and uncontrolled. Just about every building these days has a security system -- for our homes, our offices, our automobiles, even our churches. We've got burglar and fire alarms with sirens to wake the dead. Our computers come with security software to prevent all sorts of evils from befalling our 'data.' Your bank will send you an alert every time anything happens with your money. Our cell phones beep and buzz and tinkle and chime and whistle and some even ring to tell us we have an email, a message, a tweet, an instagram, or for heaven's sake an old fashioned phone call. Our Security systems aren't designed to physically prevent anything, attack, or robbery, or cyber theft. They don't incapacitate the intruder in any way, other than hopefully scaring them away. What they do is to take away the element of surprise. We

know someone has broken in; we know there is an unexpected presence or problem in our home or car or business, or church; we know we've been hacked. Like the doorkeeper in Mark, the security system keeps us from being caught, unprotected and unaware in our sleep. 'Wake, awake -- the sentry cries!'

The gospel text this week reminds us that, as we are now entering Advent -- the Season of Surprise -- we had better be on our toes, because our God is a surprising God, who has acted in surprising, unpredictable ways since the creation of Adam. Advent is a time to prepare for the miraculous birth of Christ into our world and his promised return -- but from year to year we can never really predict just when that event will occur for us in our own lives. Christ does not enter the world at the stroke of midnight on December 24. Advent can occur to us personally, or as a family, or as a church almost anytime we truly need the presence of God, or when we least expect God's coming to us. But on the other hand to claim a sure handle on the "day" and "hour" of Christ's arrival, you can pretty much count on the fact that you are wrong.

An Advent sermon, the advent season, is designed to remind us that God can and will intrude upon our lives. That even though we're on the clock for over 2000 years waiting for Jesus to come again -- God can surprise us. God can interrupt us. God can and will interpose God's presence on us at any moment. Advent says we need to be awake to the possibility.

Of course, for all of us, there are times when what is happening with us, when our very being calls out for the intrusion of God into our lives. In these last few days of thanksgiving introspection, even with all that is going on in me in these days, I've done a lot of listening, some looking at the ceiling. Have you really listened to all that news rumble lately? There are all of these rumblings from around the world working their way back into a tighter and tighter circle. There is a low, guttural cry of people in pain. Parents of children who wonder

why, and where was God when there child is in harms way. There are always rumblings from the hot spots of the world, even when the news no longer considers them hot. There are people, thousands of them still reeling from this summer's storms who are displaced from hearth and home and will spend these holidays seeking tidings of comfort and joy in a new way. There are people who need intrusion in their lives. The intrusion of God who reigns supreme and brings a message of hope, and reconciliation and justice and salvation.

How did Isaiah say it, looking around at his world, a world of inequity and callous dealing with the poor, a world of injustice where systems, even those of faith, favored the very rich, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence . . .

SURPRISE!! Have we forgotten in the midst of our anxiety, in our angst, in our cynicism and apathy what it is that God can do? Have we, who are called to be God's own, Christ's own people -- fallen asleep?

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake 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.

What in the world is Isaiah talking about – does the God we know have that kind of power any more -- tear open heavens, make mountains quake?! -- the God we know can't even break into these hardened human hearts, can't even break down the barriers of distrust, and apathy and cynicism, and anger and hatred, and pain --

Wake up!! ...We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 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."

SURPRISE!! It isn't God friends, it is us!! Ya think Mark knew this passage from Isaiah? We have fallen asleep while the master is away. We have slipped from spiritual slumber into a coma-- and in our dreams we have created a world in which **we** determine the order, in which **we** decide what it is that **we** should do, **we** have determined that half baked allegiance and commitment is better than no commitment, **we** have decided that vows and promises and pledges and covenants are made to be broken -- **we** have confused faithfulness to the church with faithfulness to Jesus Christ -- **we** have determined that it is o.k. to be less than we are called to be -- and we are in our spiritual sleep woefully, blithely unaware....

What will it take to wake us up? To enliven us once again. . .

There is a "Peanuts" comic strip in which Linus is listening carefully as his sister, Lucy, boasts about her religious faith and her potential as one who can share the faith.

She says to Linus: "I could be a terrific preacher. Do you know that kid who sits behind me in school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion."

Linus asks: "How did you do that?"

Lucy replies: "I hit him with my lunch box."

The intent of Advent is to hit us over the head with the lunch box if that is what it takes. To wake us up and surprise us once again with our great God who can intrude into our existence.

Like an alert ringing in the middle of the night the advent message says to us, "Wait, watch...someone is coming...wait watch....coming tonight....wait watch, the king of kings is near....."

Friends the time has come, the cry in the night has gone out, it is time to wake up -- to allow God the potter to mold us once again into the people we should be, the families we should be, the church we should be!!

Surprise -- Advent is here"

The goal is to be more like that 1st century church in Corinth. Their advantage was that they haven't been waiting all that long. As a pastor, Paul says to that church and I would heartily echo his words to this church, "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.

Let's just do our best – to be awake to the presence and call of Christ to us in the here and now.... Because Advent is happening.