

In the name of God who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

Here we find ourselves at the beginning of our liturgical year, Advent; it's always a little odd, that at the beginning of our year, our Lectionary readings seem to speak of endings.

Jesus' words do seem a little foreboding: He speaks of suffering, and the heavens being shaken and darkened. And over the millenia, we've thought of Jesus' return as an "end time". Very few generations have not looked around them at the suffering, chaos, and violence of their times and asked themselves, "Are these the signs of which Jesus spoke? Does this mean the end?"

But Jesus is speaking of his return; Jesus is speaking of the kingdom being revealed and coming into fruition. We've often let ourselves be distracted by thoughts of the world's ending, and have missed the message of beginning that is in Jesus' words. Jesus is telling his disciples that the coming kingdom of God is an upheaval of everything they knew and expected; and for a people caught in the cruelties of the world as it existed

then, this upheaval was the end that opened a way for a new beginning. And that is why we see the writer of our passage from Isaiah praying to God for exactly this kind of holy upheaval:

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!

Jesus' words at first glance seem like a warning; Isaiah's words are a fervent plea filled with hope: This hope is borne of the knowledge that if it is *God* who is the catalyst for change, then times of uncertainty and fear can give way to something new and lasting.

Jesus tells his disciples to keep alert, keep awake. Jesus wants them to be prepared for his coming at any moment, day or night. Jesus describes a man leaving on a journey, and leaving his home and affairs in the hands of his servants, with each servant appointed to their own work, and going

about their own tasks. Jesus, in the same way, calls us each to do the work appointed to us, and tells us to keep at it, so that when he appears, we will be found ready to receive him. But rather than think the message of Jesus' appearing is about a single end time, I would like us to think of it this morning as a continuous visitation by God. Jesus returns to us in every moment, day and night, to call us to the work given to us - to follow him, to become more Christ-like, to become more and more the image of God as we were created to be. Jesus is telling us to be alert to his presence, his continuous returning in our lives.

That is not always a comfortable thing. Jesus upends things; Jesus *is* like that fire that causes water to boil; Jesus is revolutionary, the very Word of God that tears apart the status quo, and scatters in the wind the things we taught ourselves to expect from our lives and from the world.

And this is the Good News: What Jesus upends, and tears apart are the things that hinder us. Those flimsy things that we tried to build our lives on that ultimately failed us or harmed us or harmed those around us are what Jesus returns day by day to unseat in our world and in our lives. Jesus scatters in the wind those things that diminish us, those thoughts and

behaviours that we've taken on ourselves that distance us from the image of God in which we were created. "You have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity," Isaiah says. It is a recognition by the writer that the troubles and adversities his people are facing are the symptoms of a society that is broken; a people that no longer call on God, or attempt to take hold of God's teaching. These broken systems, these harmful ways of being that hold his people in bondage to pain and suffering, cause the writer to cry out to God to tear open the heavens, come down, and shake apart the world of hurt in which they are trapped.. And once those old systems and behaviours and thoughts are swept away, they can, and we can, turn toward God in trust and humility and say here we are, your people; we are only clay, but you, God are the potter; make of us what YOU will.

Keep awake; stay alert to the continual returning of Jesus in our lives, that life-shaking power that comes within and among us, not to condemn, but to redeem. Among us, Jesus knew what it meant to be human; to feel fear, and sorrow, and anger; to feel joy, and hope, and wonder. Within us, Jesus is the strength, the compassion, and the love that is ready, always ready, to build new life once the old broken pieces are swept away.

Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down. We too can pray this as fervently as Isaiah. Because we are praying, not for the end times, but for a new beginning; and the God that comes among us is continually incarnating in our lives, continually returning as a presence ready to change us and so change the world. The God that comes among us is a God of mercy, who longs only to sweep away the works of darkness so that we may be filled with light and begin the world anew. Keep awake; be alert; Jesus is always returning. Amen.