

Covenant Word

The Wind at Our Backs

Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13-24-37

It sounds terrible and threatening. We hear it with a touch of panic and dread. But rather than hearing it as something somewhere way down the road of which to be terrified, what if we were honest enough to recognize that Jesus is speaking of coming into our lives right now? You see, the end is already upon us in our own self-destructiveness and the interruption, of which Jesus speaks, is his coming to us as the Beloved – the one who will intervene on our behalf in order to re-direct the ways we wreck our lives.

Steve Garnaas Holmes puts it this way:

The end is already upon us, always has been:
our own self-destructiveness.
The interruption is not the calamity; that's already in place.
The interruption is the Beloved, who comes into our dissolution, intervenes in our collective suicide, re-directs our plunge toward oblivion, and most shocking of all, tenderly accompanies us even through the worst of our withdrawal.

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
December 3, 2017*

It was mere coincidence that the week we went away to the mountains of Georgia was also the week that the eclipse was to occur. Our cabin was surrounded by a deck, so we immediately checked to see just where the sun might be when it was time for the eclipse to occur. There was an opening in the trees just right above us for a first-hand look at the moon passing over the sun. We had the special glasses, and the walk of the day occurred so that we were back in place for the 99% coverage at that particular place at the appointed time. As we settled on the deck to watch and wait, deer and turkey scurried by. Squirrels chased one another and birds were singing. We joked back and forth: "Those doomsayers are having a field day, but what if this really is it? What if this is the end of time? What if this is the last thing we ever do?" We assured one another that everything was taken care of, that our lives were beyond good, and while we would miss all of you, that if this was it, then we were good to go. As the woods continued to darken, we found that all the wildlife got distinctly still and quiet. Wondering. Watching. Waiting. Just as Lloyd and I had stopped everything in awe of this natural wonder, it seemed that they had too.

The Advent experience is sitting in unnatural darkness. It is a season of stillness and quiet as we anticipate Christ's interruption into our own lives as well as the end of time.

It's not the end; it's the clay being reshaped by hands with a vision for who we can be before we are fired in the kiln into durable vessels.

The Advent experience is sitting in unnatural darkness. It is a season of stillness and quiet as we anticipate Christ's interruption into our own lives as well as the end of time. Oh! You thought Advent was a time to prepare for and anticipate the birth of a baby? It is that; the anticipated coming of Christ into this world. But because his birth has already happened as a matter of historical fact, Advent is also the time we set apart to consider when and how Christ will come again, but not as a baby this time around. No, Advent anticipates a great deliverer who arrives at an unexpected time with

"In those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from heaven and the powers in heaven will be shaken. Then we will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens."

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.**



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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

unimaginable power to redeem those whom he loves. So Advent is a season set apart for us to consider how Christ is breaking through time and space to be present in our lives and in the lives of others. (Christian Century, "Living the Word," Nov. 8, 2017) We sing "cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today." Advent is expecting Christ in the here and now in our messed-up lives that often feel dark and as if they are coming apart at the seams.

A dear friend once gave me a gift that was made of barbed wire. The rusted wire made a circle so that a candle can be placed in its middle. I suspect that she gave it to me as a reminder of rural Alabama, but when I look at it, what I am reminded of is that while the Light of the world has come, there is still a lot of chaotic strife between us and the light on that wire which we can get caught and hung up. There is still darkness between us and the Light of the world.

In our Old Testament reading, the Israelites know about darkness. Isaiah 64 is written to those who have been in exile for generations. They have been pinning after the good ol' days and murmuring when they are not allowed to return to the Promised Land. The Israelites are finally given permission to return home, to return to the land of their fathers, to return to the place for which they had longed, but when the Israelites arrive home, they find everything in ruins. The temple is destroyed; their homes are all gone; and the land is ruined, desolate, broken, bearing the scars of violence. To see it, broke their hearts. They ask themselves, because God surely isn't listening, "When will our suffering ever come to an end?" (Shannon Kershner, "Honest Hope," Nov. 30, 2014, Fourth Presbyterian Church)

Their prophet, Isaiah, seeing their struggle, realizes the stranglehold of powerlessness, of barbed wire, that has captured them. Here are God's chosen people and after generations of oppression, they finally arrive home only to be surrounded by emptiness and destruction. The barbed wire of despair encircles their lives. The shadows and darkness are everywhere. And so, Isaiah, did that for which prophets are best known. He challenges God with: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down. Get down here in a hurry and set things right. Things here are so broken, so messed up, that we cannot fix it. You know, we have tried. We have reconciliation councils; we march on Washington and in Selma; we pass legislation; we write letters to Capitol Hill; we vote and we attend lectures on civil discourse but nothing is ever enough. Nothing cures the generations of systematic racism and poverty. We drink heartily, but nothing quenches our thirst for companionship and intimacy. We can't eat enough to fill the void of loss and disappointment. It all feels as painful and raw as ever. We need you to intervene with renewed hope and restored

trust. Hurry it up, God! We are running out of patience and time. Tear open the heavens and come down, because you are the only one who can make any of this right." (Kershner)

There is still darkness between us and the Light of the world.

Now what is amazing is that God did come down. God did tear open the heavens and come down not just a little, not just halfway, but God came all the way down. In Jesus, God made the unimaginable move to come all the way down into a young woman's womb; all the way down into a manger bed; all the way down to teach and preach about the Kingdom of God; all the way down to the cross; all the way down to the grave. And because God came all the way down, his disciples could see and know God did not just hold the beginning of creation in God's hands. No, Jesus is promising the disciples, and us, that God holds our current time and the end of all time, molding, shaping, working the clay of our lives. (Kershner)

While scripture paints a graphic portrait of the apocalyptic end of time, I also realize that the end comes to us at different times and in different ways. In this sanctuary alone on any given Sunday, the end of time looks a lot like grief. Are you aware that 13 members, since May, have lost a significant family member? Every Sunday, grief sits alongside devastation from estrangement, separation, divorce, the end of family for which we hoped. It looks like the loss of dreams, loss of trust in relationships, the death of expectations and unexpected diagnoses. Daily, life disappoints us and we disappoint ourselves as best laid plans fail and flop. If we can muster any self-awareness at these times, an honest moment to take stock or a quick look in the mirror, we realize that we can duck, hold our breath, pull the covers over our heads OR we can enter into Advent wherein the assurance of God's goodness can release us from our captivity, liberate us from our fear and deliver us from hardness of heart.

Some of you may know Mahan Siler. Mahan was one of the first Baptist preachers to be taken to task by the Southern Baptist Convention because of his welcoming stance to gays and lesbians at Pullen Memorial Baptist Church.

The turbulence around rejection by the Southern Baptist Convention, as well as the local church and surrounding community. Mahan's children lost confidence in the church and in their personal faith. His son, Marshall, in particular, left the church and never looked back. With a broken marriage and substance abuse defining his adult life, Mahan's son, Marshall possessed such despair that he completed suicide in June of this year. Out of respect for Marshall's beliefs about the church, there was not a church service. Instead, the family gathered for the purpose of telling stories about Marshall. Mahan called it sharing in "the sacredness of their grief." At that gathering, Mahan told the following:

Hurry it up, God! We are running out of patience and time. Tear open the heavens and come down...

To celebrate his fiftieth birthday, Marshall cycled... the Lewis and Clark Trail to the west coast. This seven week venture was to raise funds for Asheville High School in appreciation for the educational experiences given to his daughters Jessica and Hannah. I volunteered to drive the support car for the first leg of the journey.

This was our routine: I would drive about fifteen miles up ahead, position myself on the side of the highway, I set up a table, got out the peanut butter, fruit, and water. Then I would open my chair and bask in the stunning far horizons of the South Dakota plains – waiting for Marshall. I can see him now coming over the lip of the hill headed in my direction, soon to arrive at our little “watering hole.”

Marshall was fully alive, so fully Marshall – Marshall with his huge heart wanting to raise money for what he valued and appreciated... Marshall loving the challenge of a grand adventure... Marshall alive with his integrated blend of body, mind, and spirit. He was happy, so happy.

Then, after a quick stop, I would drive another fifteen miles and once again set up the table of replenishment. On and on, the same routine day in and day out. What joy! It was pure father and son pleasure, an “investment in memory.”

One day, the winds were exceptionally strong against him. He pushed himself to the limit in order to make our destination. Marshall was physically spent when we arrived in the late afternoon. Dusk was approaching. But suddenly sparks came to his eyes, “Dad, I want to ride back the way we came. I want to experience the wind at my back: So we did. We backtracked the thirty or forty miles, eating supper at the same place we ate lunch.

Then Mahan said, “Marshall has struggled so hard these last months. He has struggled courageously against the wind. But now, he has made a turn and I am imagining him as experiencing the wind of never-ending love at his back.”

“The wind of never ending love at your back.” That’s Advent. Advent, no matter the cataclysmic mess in our lives, moving us ever closer to love and grace.

The youth choir at Southside Baptist used to sing an Irish blessing at the end of the Sunday evening service, and I think the Birmingham Boys Choir sings it still. So say it with me, if you know it:

May the road rise to meet you.
May the wind blow at your back.
May the sun shine warmly on your face;
May the rains fall soft on your fields
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.

This Advent, I’m not fearing an election. I’m not fearing being taxed out of my home. I am not fearing intercontinental missiles. I am not fearing skies that seemingly open in threat. No, this Advent, I am inviting God to help me turn the corner so that I can welcome the wind at my back pushing me to find the never-ending love of God in a tiny baby in a manger who is powerful enough to help us live into a promising new reality. Will you join me in the welcoming and watching? May it be so, Amen.

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