

## ... the time will come

Isaiah 64:1–9

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Mark 13:24–37

### **Text: Isaiah 64:1; Mark 13:33**

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

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

### **Introduction**

The biblical question is ‘how long’ not ‘why’. When it comes to the matter of human suffering; the matter of the inhumanity humans inflict on their fellow humans; the question posed to God is how long will you allow this to continue? They don’t ask *why*—they seem to know that there is no rational explanation for evil; nothing that makes sense of the corruption of the human heart. How long? The prophet in Isaiah prays for relief to come soon...“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Jesus said to stay alert because the question isn’t *whether* the time will come but *when* the time will come that will bring about the end of human history as we now know it.

1. I was reading an [article](#) about two behavioural science professors who became famous for their research into why people bend the truth. It turns out that they have been accused of fabricating data upon which they based their claims. They were studying dishonesty and the question posed is, was their work a lie? The aim of much of this research was to propose ways to modify human behaviour; does it make a difference, for example, if a person signs an honesty pledge at the beginning of an insurance claim form or at the end. It was a quote near the end of the story that caught my attention. “In the past few years, some eminent behavioral scientists have come to regret their participation in the fantasy that kitschy modifications of individual behavior will repair the world.”

The idea that humans today have advanced to some stage of moral superiority in comparison to our ancestors is, for me, also a fiction. The barbarity on display in the various conflicts in our world surely says otherwise. The vitriol of political discourse isn’t decreasing. We humans may have been able to see deeper into the universe with the invention of the James Hubble telescope but cannot seem to penetrate the darkness of the human heart. What would cause a person today to be

hopeful about the future? Where does one look for hope? Is hope to be found in electing different leaders? I wonder if hope is in short supply among those around us.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means coming. There are two horizons for the church season of Advent. This season has us first looking to the promise of our Lord's second coming. Our eyes are lifted to that future horizon as we anticipate that day when all will be set to rights; when the new heaven and earth will appear and God will usher in the world of no more crying or pain or death. Or as C.S. Lewis describes, "now at last they were beginning chapter one of the great story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before." Christian faith is ever oriented to looking forward for the best is always yet to come.

The second horizon is his first coming as the season of Advent culminates with the celebration of Christmas when our Lord comes among us in the Babe of Bethlehem. It is another great word of hope that has us looking forward to the celebration on Christmas Eve. The hope being that he is here. God hasn't left us alone to our own devices in the mess we made of the world but has come among us to redeem. The reason for hope is because He is our hope. The One who has come and is coming. Christian faith is filled with the hope that Jesus is; a message that our world needs to hear; a world where there is little that gives us hope.

But what about those times when circumstances crush us. The evil of this world wounds people and wounds leave scars. Traumatic events traumatize. The Psalms have a number of prayers that express the pains of just such moments. The 42<sup>nd</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> Psalms are cases in point. "I say to God, my rock," prays the Psalmist, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?" And after similar expressions of grief concludes, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." I have found the Psalmist to be correct. Hope, ultimate hope, is found only in God. God triumphs not evil. Indeed our Lord's triumph was in the way of suffering which tells me that suffering is never the end of the believer's story.

2. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was convinced that God could do more with sin than forgive it. He believed that we could be transformed into the image of God's Son Jesus Christ; that Jesus could cleanse the human heart. Through faith in Jesus Christ we are rescued from both the penalty and power of sin. In Wesley's understanding of God's love no one was a lost cause.

Friends, hearing the gospel revolutionises life. This is why we come to church. We are brought to faith and sustained in faith upon hearing the good news. And I would say that this revolution or transformation mostly takes place in increment fashion, line upon line. Yes, there are moments of summons like when we first decide to follow Jesus; first commit to believe in him. A time when a big step forward in faith was taken. Even so, those big steps were often the result of a lot of little steps preparing us for the big one. There are lots of hope-crushing events that impact us as we live in the world and once again we return to worship and hear the good news about the One who is our hope and we find hope is renewed. And we return to our daily lives with hope renewed to live hopefully among those around us. In this way our Lord works through us to bring the good he wants for others.

I am grateful for the work that was done by the team that crafted the strategic plan for our congregation. I know that there were times when they felt wearied by the process. I am sure there were moments when each member wondered why they signed up for the task. The question of the future of this congregation was squarely faced. What path should we take? Should we continue as best we could and the last person close the doors or should we embrace a vision of a thriving future? A great deal of effort was expended to map a way forward and in many respects it is a statement of hope because of the One who is our hope, Jesus Christ. My prayer is that there will be a continuing witness to the love of Jesus for a lost world by this congregation as there has been for its first 183 years.

3. Each time we confess our faith with the Apostles' creed we say, in our confession about Jesus, that he will come to judge the living and the dead. There is an accounting at the end of the age when all things will be set to rights. The good news of the gospel is that our sin was remedied at the cross and the verdict for the believer is acquittal. The one who comes to judge we know to be our saviour. And so we look forward to his coming because in the words of Jesus, he comes "to gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." He comes to take his people to that eternal home.

Some have wondered, if this world is passing away why bother with it. Why bother trying to make the world a better place? First, and foremost, because God bothered with this world by coming among us in Jesus Christ. God does not disdain the world he has made, rather he redeems the world. Jesus stated his mission with the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to

proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

The fact that our gaze as Christians is towards the horizon of his coming again does not mean we forget the life he has given us here. All life is a gift of God. When Jesus called believers to keep alert to when the time of his return will come he said, "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." We have each been given work to do until he comes (or takes us home). This is the work of the kingdom; the work of making known the hope of the world, Jesus Christ.

I invite you to consider afresh the gospel writer Mark as he writes (proclaims) this story of Jesus and includes our Lord's teaching about the time that will come. He wants his listeners to hear our Lord's word to "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." Mark's first audience for his gospel is the beleaguered Christians in Rome. Mark has been a travelling companion with the Apostle Peter and his gospel is thought to reflect the sermons of Peter. But Peter has been recently executed by Nero (along with Paul) in the wave of persecution against Christians that followed Nero's accusation that they were responsible for the fires that destroyed Rome's slums. Mark shows up in Rome to encourage the Christians to hang on to faith in Jesus Christ; his theme is that Jesus is victor over all the forces of death that destroys human life.

These Christians must be wondering why Jesus hasn't returned to put an end to these cruelties that humans inflict on other humans. You could hear them pray the prayer Isaiah offered, 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.'" Perhaps because this is not happening some of these Christians are beginning to lose heart. For Mark, Jesus' teaching about the necessity of watchfulness is a word of comfort and hope. "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." Jesus is explaining the delay and assuring his followers that God's delays are never God's denials.

Jesus had further promised his followers in his commission to make disciples of all nations "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." And Jesus has a Hebrew understanding of 'remember' in mind. It is not merely to call to mind but to live in Jesus' promise as the operative reality of our lives now. Jesus has not abandoned his people but remains among us in all that we face. If the gospel writer Mark was not certain of the Lord's presence with him and them, I

hardly think he comes to Rome in this dark hour to bear witness if he thinks Jesus' promise empty.

There are voices in the church that diminish the message of Advent; that put little emphasis on our Lord's promise to come again...this time to judge the living and the dead. To lose sight of this promise—we call this eschatology meaning the doctrine of final things—is to denature the gospel. It is a truth that it is those who look forward to this future who do the most for life in this world. If there is no future and this world is all there is, we are simply left scrambling to get the biggest piece of it we can.

At the end of the book of Revelation—also a letter whose purpose is a word of hope—is this line. The one who testifies (Jesus) to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' And then this prayer "Amen (even so). Come, Lord Jesus! The word translated 'soon' also means 'suddenly,' meaning that our Lord will come unexpectedly as Jesus indicated in his teaching about not knowing when. I find myself—perhaps like many Christians before me in other ages—wanting it to be soon, meaning next week would be great. The delay can only mean that God is still gathering a people for himself and our work to bear witness is not yet complete.

"Beware, keep alert" said our Lord, "for you do not know when the time will come." Highlight those last four words and underline the word 'will'...the time will come. The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Even so. Come, Lord Jesus!