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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, New York  
The First Sunday in Advent, November 27, 2011  
Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37  
Something is Afoot<sup>1</sup>

In the name of the Father, and the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our First Lesson, from Isaiah 64. It expresses the thoughts of a world-weary heart. Israel is ready for something new. She is ready for a divine disruption of the normal run of things:

<sup>1</sup>O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at thy presence (Isaiah 64:1, RSV)

In the preceding chapter, Isaiah 63, Israel recounts her past. She is mindful of the Lord's tender mercies. She is mindful too of her own sins and of the punishments she has brought down on herself. Isaiah, then, speaks about the Lord:

...he was their Saviour. <sup>9</sup>In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old. <sup>10</sup>But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit: therefore he was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them. (Isaiah 63:8-10, KJV)

So, that is the chapter before today's reading. It contains that lovely line about the Lord's sympathy for his people:

In all their affliction *he* was afflicted. (Isaiah 63:9)

Now, in today's passage from Isaiah 64, we again hear Israel confess her sins.

... in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?... We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. <sup>7</sup>There is no one that calls upon thy name, that bestirs himself to take hold of thee; for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast delivered us into the hand of our iniquities. (Isaiah 64:5-7, RSV)

From this passage I think we can conclude that even folks conscious of their sin can and ought to pray for the mighty coming of the Lord. Israel knows that she has

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reworking of my sermon for Advent 1B, December 1, 1996. That was when it first dawned on me that in order to be awake when Jesus comes again, many of us need to get some more sleep.

been too long in her sins, and therefore she is not ready to face the Lord, and yet in the end, she trusts the Lord, and so her heart lets loose its cry:

<sup>1</sup>O that thou wouldst rend the heavens *and come down*, that the mountains might quake at thy presence (Isaiah 64:1, RSV)

Israel has been living a weary rhythm of sin, punishment, and repentance. In this morning's passage, she is at low ebb. She has suffered the destruction of Jerusalem and captivity in Babylon. She cannot claim innocence. She has reason to know that the coming of the Lord will be a stirring thing -- the kind of thing that causes mountains to quake, like fire kindling brushwood. But she would prefer that to the present ordinary run of things.

## **ADVENT**

The Season of Advent is the promise that Israel's old longing for divine intervention is coming true. Advent asks us to understand that something is brewing, something is afoot.

The Christmas carol speaks of calm on the holy night of our Lord's birth:

*Silent Night, Holy Night!*

Silent night, holy night!  
All is calm, all is bright  
round yon virgin mother and child.  
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,  
sleep in heavenly peace,  
sleep in heavenly peace.

But the truth is, there was no true calm in the hearts of humanity before the birth of our Lord. And there is no lasting calm for us until Jesus comes again.

Meanwhile, we modern folk occupy the spiritual position of Israel of old. We are too much caught up in sin and the misery sin causes for us and for everyone in sight. Advent promises that the Lord is coming. Aye, he is coming in such a tremendous way that the mountains will quake and nations tremble before him. But, Amen! Come, Lord Jesus. This is the age-old cry of the Church. Come, Lord Jesus.

## **EARLIER GENERATIONS**

Something BIG is looming. Perhaps earlier generations had a better feel for it. They knew that they needed to be prepared. They needed to be prepared for God!

Martin Luther, for example, expected the end of the world during his lifetime. Any day now, Luther thought, the Lord is sure to return, because look how bad

things are! Surely, Jesus will come soon. So, Luther expected that soon the prayers of Isaiah would come true. He expected that the LORD would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at God's presence. He looked for terrible things: for the stars to be falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens to be shaken. And Luther wanted himself, his family, his parish, and his land to be ready. So, he opposed the dissolute life. He preached against drunkenness and idleness, for he expected his people to soon be kneeling before the throne of Almighty God, with all the saints, and all the company of heaven gathered to hear judgment on the stuff of their lives. Luther was keen for the approach of God. He was like the farmer who knows from the tenderness of the branches and the putting forth of leaves that summer is near. (Mark 13:28) Luther was always looking for God and trying to have his strength and his wits ready for the encounter.

So did the early Americans. They expected the end of the human story. Let me mention one incident in particular. My wife Carol has a beautiful book about quilting called *Stitched from the Soul -- Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South* (by Gladys-Marie Fry, 1990) It so happens that some of those quilts display the extraordinary events of November 13, 1833. Scientists would say it was a meteor shower -- an 8-hour shower of space debris. But eyewitnesses experienced it differently. To them, it was "snowing fire." The cries went up: "the end of the world has come," "the sky is on fire," and "Judgment Day is here."

A white planter in South Carolina reports on the reaction of his slaves:<sup>2</sup>

I was suddenly awakened by the most distressing cries that ever fell on my ears. Shrieks of horror and cries of mercy I could hear from most of the [slaves] of the three plantations, amounting in all to about 600 to 800. While earnestly listening for the cause I heard a faint voice near the door...saying, "O my God, the world is on fire!" I then opened the door, and it is difficult to say which excited me the most - the awfulness of the scene, or the distressed cries of the [slaves]. Upwards of a hundred lay prostrate on the ground, -- some speechless, and some with the bitterest cries, but with their hands raised, imploring God to save the world and them. The scene was truly awful; for never did rain fall much thicker than the meteors fell towards the earth; east, west, north and south, it was the same. (Mary Proctor, *The Romance of Comets*)

So, the slaves make anguished cries about the visitation of God, while the white farmer speaks of "meteors." And who, I wonder, is closer to the truth? The thing about the slaves is that they had learned the Bible perhaps better than their masters who urged it upon them. At least they had learned today's Gospel lesson:

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<sup>2</sup> He calls his slaves "the negroes." I have simply called them "the slaves."

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,<sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.<sup>26</sup> And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. (Mark 13:24-26, RSV)

## GET SOME SLEEP!

Jesus is the one prophesying these things. He is the one who speaks of the day when the stars begin to fall. And then, lest we fail to reach the reasonable conclusion, Jesus goes ahead and states it for us. He urges us to prepare ourselves for that great and awesome day:

<sup>35</sup>Watch therefore -- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning -- <sup>36</sup>lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. <sup>37</sup>And what I say to you I say to all: Watch." (Mark 13:35-36, RSV)

Now, to help accomplish what our Lord says in this text, I feel that I must say almost the reverse! Our Lord Jesus says, "Take heed, watch, keep awake." I say, in all seriousness, I think maybe you need some more sleep. You've been burning the midnight oil too much. You need to become more settled in spirit. You have been overworking and overplaying. Many of us New Yorkers have been burning the candle at both ends for too long. We've been drinking too much coffee<sup>3</sup>. We risk exhaustion, depletion, and ill-preparation for the sudden return of our Lord.

You say that you cannot read the Bible in the evening, or *Moby Dick*, or history, or anything serious because it knocks you out, sends you right off into dreamland. Then, I say, by all means start reading the Bible, fine literature, history, or anything serious, and by all means nod off to sleep and drift off to dreamland. This is your body trying to tell you something. You need more sleep. You need some more rest! You cannot keep saying to yourself, five hours of sleep is going to have to be enough. You cannot keep relying on so much coffee. You cannot keep presuming upon your strength. You cannot keep going with that burst of energy that seems to come upon you in the wee hours of the night, but which really amount to nothing more than a temptation to exhaust yourself.

That's it! You must stop deceiving yourself. You cannot keep saying to yourself, "Life just isn't complete, life just isn't fair, life just isn't fun enough, unless I can stay up and watch this movie!"

And you must let the Jones go. Do not try so hard to keep up with them. You

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<sup>3</sup> By the way, I used this line about drinking too much coffee in my parish email earlier this week. Parish Secretary Karen Rombey and I got a bit of a chuckle about that. I took the email to her for her to review. I set the text down on her desk and said, without thinking, "While you look at this, I'm gonna go make some coffee." Ahh, that's how smooth and relentless our dependencies can be.

splinter your strength, your money, and your time in a thousand directions that have too little to do with your center. You expose yourself too much to excitement. Learn to walk with your head bowed, so that you will be humble and not so bedazzled by window shopping. Be open, at least some of the time, to plain clothes that do not invite you to be seen so much.

To be ready for the sudden return of Jesus requires that we slow down some. If we have permitted life to become such a panic, if we have splintered our strength in a thousand ways, if we have lost our center as Christians, then I fear that we will have done our best to be ready for God as he presents himself to us in the face of our neighbors, our children, our colleagues, our relatives, our elderly.

In today's first scripture reading, Isaiah gives the troubling human confession:

We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
(Isa 64:6)

But this fading like a leaf and this taking away of our chances is something for which we bear some responsibility. This fading comes partly from our own burning of the candle at both ends. It comes partly from the fatigue to which we drive ourselves. So, let us take heed, watch, and be ready. Let us toil, and let us sleep, always with the goal that we will seek the Advent of our Lord Jesus, as he comes to us this day and in the final day. To him be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.