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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37
Yearning for a Big Change

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I know by personal experience that a preacher cannot say all that needs to be said in one sermon. At least I cannot do so. That is why I am so grateful to you folks for coming back to Immanuel over and over again, so that we preachers will have a better chance to preach the fullness of the faith over the stretch of our careers. If that is so for a plain preacher like me — that I cannot preach in one sermon everything that needs to be said — I should think that would be even more so for Jesus. For his mind and his heart are more subtle, wise, and compassionate than mine or other preachers. So, I dare to say that in today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus has preached important truth to us, but not *the whole* of the truth he knows and he is.

In today's Gospel Readings from Mark 13, Jesus warns us to be ready when the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, the stars begin to fall, and Jesus returns with great power and glory. "Keep awake," Jesus says (Mark 13:37). And that makes perfect sense to me. If we do not know the day or the hour of His return, then we should live each day as if it is worthy of being the day of our Lord's return. Keep awake. It will be good for us and for our neighbors for us to get ourselves ready for the Second Coming of Jesus.

So, that is today's sermon from Jesus: Keep awake.

But there are other things on the mind of Jesus too, besides his call to readiness. And we find those other things throughout the Bible. Indeed, we find much of them in the Old Testament. Especially I want to focus on today's reading from Isaiah 64 as expressing the very mind of Christ. Jesus wants us to heed what he says in our Gospel Lesson from Mark 13, but also he wants us to heed what he says through his prophet Isaiah so many, many centuries ago.

I wonder: Do you sometimes sense that this is not the time for business as usual... because business as usual is not looking very good. Regular ways are not working. We have people in our congregation who say to me, "Pastor, I think Jesus is coming again soon. Things cannot go on this way. They cannot last, so I think Jesus is coming again soon." And to this, I always say, "Amen. Come Lord Jesus. This afternoon would be fine." I might not sense the Second Coming as intensely as some people do, but I understand their logic. They think that if you take the world as it is now and try to extrapolate into the future, the future looks doubtful. They worry about crime. They worry about the environment and rising seas. They worry about terrorism and nuclear weapons. They worry about artificial intelligence running amok. They worry

about the decline of patriotism. They worry about the erosion of the instinct to do unto others as you would them do unto you. They worry about a fading away of courtesy. You and I might not think that a big deal, but some people in our congregation think that it *is* a big deal... that the future does not bode well when people cannot even give their seat on the subway to a pregnant lady.

Now, it so happens that ancient Jerusalem and Judah felt that way. The people felt that things just could not go on the way they were going. They felt that God needed to do something radical to turn this ship around. Devout people of God had been born, grew up, and lived in Babylonian Captivity. They had done okay there in Babylon, but never forgot Jerusalem. They longed to go home. Then in 539 BC, the Persian emperor, Cyrus the Great, issued an edict permitting the Jews to leave Babylon and return home. Many of them did. But when they got home, things were discouraging. Eventually they rebuilt the Temple, but it was not as glorious as Solomon's Temple that had been leveled by the Babylonians. They had hoped for a pure and vigorous renewal of faith, but instead they experience poverty sometimes, and mediocrity much of the time.

So, Isaiah puts into words the longing of the people:

¹⁰ that you would tear open the heavens and come down... (Isaiah 64:1, NRSV)

It is like the folks in our congregation who are longing and crying, "Come, Lord Jesus. Come!"

This ancient cry of the people of God to "tear open the heavens and come down"... this ancient cry is the lament of a people who have exhausted all other means of support. To them, the universe is empty of help *unless* the LORD should help them. Look to the right, look to the left: none of the ordinary means of help will suffice. They need the LORD! They cry for the LORD to come and change things.

Now, such a cry means that you are open to an adventure. You are open to uncertainty. The moving thing about the lament of the people is that they know that they are not innocent. They know that in crying for the LORD to come down, they are exposing themselves to a holy God, while they themselves have not been holy. And so we read their confession:

⁵...in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?

⁶...We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

⁷There is no one that calls upon thy name,
that bestirs himself to take hold of thee;

(Isaiah 64:5-7, RSV)

Imagine the spiritual condition of people who can make such a confession and at the same time, ask their holy God to tear open the heavens and come down. "...in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?" And still they cry, "Come, LORD. Rend the heavens and come down." Does this not reveal in the people a deep consciousness of their sins, but also a deep confidence in their God?

The prophet Isaiah is moved by the mind of Christ. His words are inspired by the Holy Spirit. What Jesus has done is that he has permitted the old prophet Isaiah to express the ancient faith of Israel in ways that are natural and human for him, but which at the same time express the very mind and Spirit of Jesus.

So, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Isaiah puts into words the lament, the confession, and the prayer of Israel. Isaiah does not hesitate to say that the people have sinned and that they have been in their sins a long time. He even wonders whether such a people can be saved. And yet he also frames Israel's deepest prayer: "Come, LORD. Rend the heavens and come down."

Such a heartfelt confession and prayer have succeeded in the past. Think of the intercession of Moses on behalf of the people. While Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments up on Mount Sinai, the people had grown restless, forged themselves a golden calf, and danced before that calf. The LORD is so angry about this that he tells Moses that he means to destroy the people. But Moses interposes his own life between the LORD and the people. For me, this is one of the most stirring passages in the Bible. I mean, we have only one life to live. Yet Moses is willing to lay down his life for the people. The passage is in Exodus 32. It goes this way:

³⁰On the morrow Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." ³¹So Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. ³²But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written." (Exodus 32:30-32, RSV)

It puts me in mind of Jesus. Moses was willing to die for the people. Our Savior Jesus did in fact die for us.

So, that is Moses — more than a thousand years before today's prophet Isaiah. But, like Moses, Isaiah intercedes for the people. He admits that the people have sinned. His sins and the sins of the people are ever before him. And yet, something bigger is also ever before him. I mean, the mercy of our

God. Isaiah does not argue that the people are not so bad. Rather, he appeals to the reality that our God is good, awfully good.

And so we come to the very moving conclusion to Isaiah's appeal to the LORD.

⁸Yet, O LORD, thou art our Father;
we are the clay, and thou art our potter;
we are all the work of thy hand.

⁹Be not exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and remember not iniquity for ever.
Behold, consider, we are all thy people. (Isaiah 64:8-9, RSV)

It is like that hymn beloved to many Christian. "Just As I Am." Those who sing that hymn lay down any claim to virtue and instead cast themselves on the goodness of our God:

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidd'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come. (LBW 296, verse 1)

There will come a time, when Isaiah's cry to tear open the heavens and come down will come true. I am thinking of the death of Jesus. I am thinking of the tearing of the curtain in the temple — a tearing that begins above and comes down:

³⁷And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last. ³⁸And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:37-39, RSV)

So, where does this all leave us? Well, adding it all up, I think we are left with two great principles — principles that should guide our lives. First, from our Gospel Lesson, we hear Jesus appeal to us to be ready. There is a God, and we must answer to Him. So, let us get ready. In the years left to us, let us try to live in such a fashion that we will have fewer things to regret at the Final Judgment.

So, that is good and plain. But the second principle is important too, lest we become discouraged and lose hope. The second principle is that our God is merciful. We do not have to brag about ourselves and our accomplishments. Let the one who boasts, boast of the Lord, as St. Paul said (1 Corinthians 1:31)

Do not let one of these two great principles cancel out the other. The adventure of the Christian life is to maintain both principles in our hearts and in our lives. So, press ahead, seeking to live an even more holy life, but knowing too that someday we are going stand before Jesus, and he is a good man, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.