

Advent I (RCL/B): "Come, Lord Jesus... But Not Till We're Ready!"  
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37  
December 2-3, 2023  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Are you ready for unannounced company to drop into your home this very moment?? I'm sure that **some** of you have homes that are **always** company-ready: no dishes in the sink (or even in the dish drain!), no unfolded laundry anywhere, not even in the laundry room, beds made, no children's or pets' toys laying around willy-nilly.... Some of the rest of us can't say the same! But as an adult, I've come to realize that a warm welcome to unexpected guests is more important than a kitchen table that is cleared.

It's taken me awhile to get there in my mind. My memory goes back to childhood after my mother died, when Grandma Horton would spend half the year with us. She was in her 80's (and actually had never learned to drive) so Uncle Harold would drive her back and forth from Yonkers to Florham Park. I **loved** Grandma and **couldn't wait** for her to come back, but I also knew we needed to work hard to prepare for her arrival. The house needed to be "straightened." We couldn't let her see what disarray it had fallen into since her last visit. Sharon's sewing had to be cleared out of the dining room. The ashtray Dad used last time he smoked a cigar had to be emptied and cleaned. The laundry had to be folded and put away. Grandma's room had to be dusted and vacuumed. If we'd wanted to send her a message, it would have been, "Grandma, come, but not till we're ready!"

If we'd want to send Jesus a message, it might be, "Jesus, come, but not till we're ready!" We know there are some folks who are **more** than ready. Among them are those who suffer most greatly, for whom no relief is in sight. Maybe given the disturbing things happening in our world, **you, too**, are ready to echo the prophet Isaiah's plea in the first verse of today's first lesson:

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!* (Isa. 64:1a, NRSV)

*Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and descend!* (Isa. 64:1a, *The Message*)

Tear the clouds like a piece of cloth, as the high priest tears the fabric of his robe when He believes Jesus has uttered blasphemy at His trial before the Sanhedrin. Tear the heavens open so there will be continuous communion between heaven and earth, like when the Temple curtain is shredded from top to bottom as Jesus breathes His last on the cross. Today's Gospel about the Lord's Second Coming happens near the end of St. Mark's Gospel, during Holy Week, after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on "Palm Sunday," but before the Last Supper. Jesus is looking beyond His death to His return again, and He's advising His closest friends and followers, "Be On The Lookout!": be aware, beware of My sudden return, keep alert, keep awake, don't be caught off-guard. I want you to be prepared, so I'm giving you ample heads-up. I'm warning you that a time will come when there will be no more time. That will be a time of judgment.

So how does this fit with Santa photo ops in the mall, Christmas cookies, tree decorating, and eggnog? The lead-in of the Church (capital C) to Christmas is actually a lot different than the rest of the world's. Our preparation starts with Advent I worship and not Black Friday shopping. Our preparation looks not just back to Jesus' birth as a Baby in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago; it looks forward to His return as Lord and Judge, filled with great power and surrounded by great glory, at some unspecified time in the future.

Truth be told, there have been times in my life when I've been devastated by the loss of loved ones and have asked the Lord, "*Why didst Thou not rend the heavens and come down?*" "Could've used Your help! Where **were** You??" Looking in the rearview mirror, I know the answer is that the Lord was right there beside me, granting me grace, strength-for-the-day, the ability to do the next right thing – but it felt so **lonely**.... and I was **angry** about who and what I'd lost. Like

Martha and Mary after Lazarus' death, I sometimes have wanted to say, "Lord, if you'd been here, my sister would not have died." Why **didn't** You tear open the heavens and come down then? And given the suffering I see in Your world today, why **don't** You tear open the heavens and come down now?

But this reflection by Madeleine L'Engle, using imagery from today's Gospel, always helps me pause before asking the Lord to rend the heavens and come back **now, right now**. In her book *The Irrational Season* she writes:

Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come  
 In your fearful innocence.  
 We fumble in the far-spent night  
 Far from lovers, friends, and home:  
 Come in your naked, newborn might.  
 Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come;  
 My heart withers in your absence.

Come, Lord Jesus, small, enfleshed  
 Like any human, helpless child.  
 Come once, come once again, come soon:  
 The stars in heaven fall, unmeshed;  
 The sun is dark, blood's on the moon.  
 Come, word who came to us enfleshed.  
 Come speak in joy untamed and wild.

Come, thou wholly other, come,  
 Spoken before words began,  
 Come and judge your uttered world  
 Where you made our flesh your home.  
 Come, with bolts of lightning hurled,  
 Come, thou wholly other come,  
 Who came to man by being man.

Come, Lord Jesus, at the end,  
 Time's end, my end, forever's start.  
 Time, like the temple veil, now rend;  
 Come, shatter every human hour.  
 Come, Lord Jesus, at the end.  
 Break, then mend the waiting heart.

[L'Engle continues:] We have much to be judged on when he comes, slums and battlefields and insane asylums, but these are symptoms of our illness, and the result of our failures in love. In the evening of life we shall be judged on love, and not one of us is going to come off very well, and were it not for my absolute faith in the loving forgiveness of my Lord I could not call on him to come.

But his love is greater than all our hate, and he will not rest until Judas has turned to him, until Satan has turned to him, until the dark has turned to him; until we can all, all of us without exception, freely return his look of love in our own eyes and hearts. And then, healed, whole, complete but not finished, we will know the joy of being co-creators with the one to whom we call.

Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

A little mantra I've been repeating to myself lately is, "I am rich in time, I am rich in time." It's an affirmation I believe the Holy Spirit has given me and not one that I dreamed up myself, because most days I'm more apt to feel **pressed** for time than **rich** in time! But the reality this Advent is that we are **alive** and therefore we **are** rich in time to prepare the way of the Lord. The way we prepare isn't by watching the sky to see if the moon is darkening or the stars are falling. We prepare by recognizing the Lord's Presence among us in the last, the lost, and the lost, and seeking opportunities to serve those desperate enough to pray, *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!* Our Lord's words echo in our ears: *Whenever you did it to one of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*" (Matt. 25:40)

Our Christian belief is that God **did** come down from heaven when Jesus was born. Our Savior longs to become incarnate again through us. If that's happening among us, we'll be able to pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," without having to add, "But not till we're ready!" Amen

<sup>1</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *The Irrational Season* (NY: Seabury Press, 1977), pp. 214-215.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

