

Isaiah 64 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— 2as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! 3When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 4From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. 5You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

6We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 7There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. 8Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. 9Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13

*24“But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,*

and the moon will not give its light,

25and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

26Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. 27Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

28“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

32“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34It 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. 35Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, 36or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

There has been enough suffering. The tsunami - that was enough human suffering by itself. All that has been happening in Iraq and all the sorrow and grief that are suffered there - New Orleans, Cancun: hurricanes that have altered communities and lives forever - Pakistan and India: quaking earth and shivering people left without shelter against the cold of winter. And when the cameras turn away to chase after other disasters the suffering and sorrow continue. There has been enough suffering.

Can you hear how many pray, “If only you would split open the heavens and come down!” The suffering and sorrow are more than they can bear. A wife with cancer - a job lost at the worst possible moment - a child that has gone astray - unfaithfulness discovered - a son or daughter to bury. “If only you would split open the heavens and come down!”

The sufferers of our day are not the first to pray this prayer. Their voices join the cries from Jews exterminated at Buchenwald - families that were devastated by the swine flu of 1918 - communities burned to the ground in Sherman’s march through the south - cries of families ripped apart by slave traders. Has there been a place on earth or a moment in time that has not joined in this cry for an end of evil and the triumph of God?

“If only you would split open the heavens and come down!” The prophet wrote these words at a time when Jerusalem had been made a wasteland, the holy and beautiful temple burned to the ground. He prayed, “When you did awe-inspiring things that we didn’t expect you came down and the mountains quaked in your presence.” The prophet was remembering – not what had happened in his lifetime but what he had heard from those who had gone before. The Lord freed the people from slavery in Egypt - the walls of Jericho fell down at the sound of the trumpets - Goliath toppled to the ground by the shepherd boy, David. The whole history of Gods’ people was filled with awe-inspiring things the Lord had done. But when this prophet spoke of the temple he spoke of the temple as the place his ancestors had worshipped. The temple had been ashes for a long time. “If only you would split open the heavens and come down!”

“You help those who wait for you,” the prophet declared. “You meet those who gladly do right and remember your way.” We all think that is true. God is faithful – God cares for the faithful ones. So what does that say about villages toppled by a quaking world, washed into the sea, drowned in rising flood waters? As long as you and I are not in the village it may be easy to think they got what they deserve. But the prophet knows he and his people deserve to be swept away. He prays to the Lord, “You showed your anger because we sinned. We’ve continued to sin a long time. Can we still be saved?”

The truth is that there was a lot of sin in New Orleans, and a lot of sin in Iraq, and a lot of sin in Pakistan. The truth is that there is a lot of sin in Cleveland, a lot of sin in Avon and Avon Lake and Sheffield Lake. The truth is there is a lot of sin in you, a lot of sin in me. The prophet declares: “We’ve all become unclean, all our righteous acts are like permanently stained rags. No one calls on your name or tries to hold on to you. You have hidden your face from us. You have let us be ruined by our sins.”

Yet when we are filled up with suffering we cry, “If only you would split open the heavens and come down!” Can we still be saved? Will God be gracious?

Once already the heavens were split, torn open. That is exactly what the scriptures say happened the day Jesus was baptized – the heavens were torn open and the Spirit of God descended as a dove upon Jesus. Jesus is what happens when the heavens are opened.

Can we still be saved? Jesus is God’s answer yes. Yes for Jesus’ sake God will save you; yes, for Jesus’ sake God will forgive you all your sins - yes, for Jesus’ sake.

The gospel reading for today speaks of the day when the heavens will be torn open once more and the Son of man will gather the elect from the four winds. Then Jesus teaches us: “Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. Therefore keep awake.”

Keep awake to remembering where hope is to be found – not in making excuses or placing blame but in trusting in the one who gave his life for our salvation. Hope will not be found in building dikes to hold back the floods or in tsunami warning systems but our hope is in the one who will be born child of Mary. Keep awake to trusting in him and not in the fact that the storm did not get you this time for he will come to save. Amen.