

**Tearing open what is**  
Jubilee Mennonite Church  
December 3, 2017  
Advent 1, Year B

**Purpose:** To explore the revealing of what God is doing even now

**Message:** The newness that we seek comes from God who makes all things new.

**Scripture:**

**Old Testament**     **64:1–8 [ Sermon Text, I will read]**

**Gospel**     **Mark 13:32–37 [Secondary Text: Please read]**

Old Testament     Genesis 6:1–3, 5–14, 17–22 (Supplemental)

Psalm     Psalm 24

New Testament     1 Corinthians 1:3–9

New Testament     1 Peter 3:18–22 (Supplemental)

**Synopsis:** We often struggle to contemplate the apocalyptic. We have made the notion of what is to be a foreign, fear laden thing like a horror movie. Often we associate the coming of God's spirit at the end of things as the greatest possible disaster. Yet, apocalypse is ultimately a sense of revealing what is; a notion of how things SHOULD be. We often feel the absence of God's action and cry out for change to come. Yet, are we prepared for all that the appearance of God's future will mean for all of us? May we be given the grace to trust in this revelation even as we try to contemplate what it might all mean.

**Isaiah 64:1-9** (Tanakh)

If You would but tear open the heavens and come down,  
So that mountains would quake before You— <sup>1</sup>

As when fire kindles brushwood,  
And fire makes water boil—  
To make Your name known to Your adversaries  
So that nations will tremble at Your Presence,

<sup>2</sup>When You did wonders we dared not hope for,  
You came down  
And mountains quaked before You.

<sup>3</sup>Such things had never been heard or noted.  
No eye has seen [them], O God, but You,  
Who act for those who trust in You.

<sup>4</sup>Yet you have struck him who would gladly do justice,  
And remember You in Your ways.  
It is because You are angry that we have sinned;  
We have been steeped in them from of old,  
And can we be saved?

<sup>5</sup>We have all become like an unclean thing,  
And all our virtues like a filthy rag.  
We are all withering like leaves,  
And our iniquities, like a wind, carry us off.

<sup>6</sup>Yet no one invokes Your name,  
Rouses himself to cling to You.  
For You have hidden Your face from us,  
And made us melt because of our iniquities.

<sup>7</sup>But now, O Lord, You are our Father;  
We are the clay, and You are the Potter,  
We are all the work of Your hands.

<sup>8</sup>Be not implacably angry, O LORD,  
Do not remember iniquity forever.  
Oh, look down to Your people, to us all!

<sup>9</sup>Your holy cities have become a desert:  
Zion has become a desert,  
Jerusalem a desolation.

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<sup>1</sup> Jewish Publication Society. (1985). [\*Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures\*](#) (Is 63:19). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Well, it's official. The holiday season has arrived, full of trimming and trappings. The domestic divas of the day are all abuzz on how to pull off the perfect holiday party, preparing scrumptious delights whose difficulty is something akin to a triple axle on ice skates, yet presented in such a light a breezy way as to say "oh that, but a trifle I whipped between taking the kids to soccer and doing power yoga." Media has given itself over to the all-Christmas-all-time programming strategy. Luke, who likes to poke random buttons on the remote managed to record a couple hours of burning logs for us the other day. These are days in which we hold up our ideals of how things should be, usually from some sense of an old-timey Norman Rockwell idealism. It's the most wonderful time, and we hope it is said of us that we keep Christmas well.

In the midst of this season of celebration comes a sense of celebration in spite of the world, not because we particularly have to cause to celebrate. References to nuclear war are more common than I can recall. Many who we have revered and valued through the years have often been using power in ways they should not have. Cruelty has been promoted to a new art form, with suggestions out loud that it ought to be the powerful only who survive. At home and abroad, there is a sense that all is not right with the world. We wonder when it is all going to end. We wonder how it might work itself out. We wonder whether these might be days of apocalypse, days in which the long anticipated Kingdom of God might appear. And perhaps they are; they may be, though I am guessing that meditations such as these have been a feature of the preacher's art for centuries now. For the record, I can say two things with absolute certainty about the end of time: that God will be in it, and that every last one of us will be surprised. Much beyond that is largely guesswork, I would contend.

Yet we pine for Apocalypse. We, like Isaiah find ourselves longing for God to break things open, to tear the heavens and set things to right; we wish that God would reveal God for who God is and who we know God to be. We join our voices and wish that God might act like God did long ago and come in full evidence of being God. That is what we are talking about when we speak of Apocalypse. Despite its long and fanciful tradition of being disaster film fodder, Apocalypse is ultimately the revealing of the way things are, how they really can be known to be. Apocalypse means to reveal. To quote one commentator, apocalyptic writing aims "to make the invisible visible" while also "reveal[ing] the true nature of visible things."<sup>2</sup> In other

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<sup>2</sup> (<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5001>)

words, to call a spade a spade... if you can do that poetically. Isaiah here is speaking to those who were in exile, away from all that made them the people of God—the temple, the presence of God’s Spirit, all of it. As you can hear, the Prophet is calling on God to stand up and act, big and bold. The argument (it is an argument with God, albeit in one in the tone of Lament) goes so far as to suggest that “yes, we have sinned, but we are sinful still in your anger with us.” The apocalypse is coming, God’s revealing is coming when Israel will be restored, but Israel wishes that they could be restored now, and a good deal of apocalyptic revelation would help them get back on the right path so they could be reminded exactly who they are dealing with in YHWH God. “We know there is Sin,” the prophet pleads, “Yet, remember that we are your people all the same.”

Sometimes it is exactly what we wait for that can get us into trouble. Living in the desert changes you. After 10-12 weeks of blue skies and sunny weather, you long for even some overcast to break the monotony. You would not believe how many ways TV Meteorologists in the desert Southwest have for phrasing “Sunny and Hot” in all its gradations. Despite the complete predictability of the weather, there is a longing for change, especially for the rains to come. There is much anticipation as you watch and wait; and when the rain does come, there is complete Joy. Once the first monsoon rains broke on a Sunday morning, and there was nothing for it but to pause the service, run outside and bask in the wet. Yet within days, the joy converts to a certain anxiety. Of course, when you have fewer than 10 inches of rain a year, you value every drop. But when it starts raining, and the ground becomes saturated, flooding quickly becomes a problem. What we prayed for so fervently we now hope desperately will at least slow down so we don’t all wash away.

God’s love is revealed as a sign of hope, a promise of light, but also can be a reason for much fear and trembling as it is keen anticipation. We wish to see the revelation of God’s love, for the earth to move from its tired stupor. But we also know that when the mountains shake, we can be shaken too. We know much of the world shaken; earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and war have become staples of the daily news. There are consequences when the world shakes; long held foundations can crumble, assumptions about safety and reality are forever changed, the foundational inequities of culture and life can be exposed. When the world moves, there are consequences. We must ask ourselves, are we really ready for this apocalypse the mountains to

quake, for the nations to be shaken, for the power of God's world altering love to come yet again, for the coming of this love to reveal that which the present darkness hides? Are we ready for the coming of God's love into the world, ready to be a part of that love, to be changed by it, and to work for it? How will we recognize the movement of God around us? How will we participate in the work of God, the work of teaching clearly, leading boldly, loving radically, and executing justice beyond the ways of the world as it always have been? We must keep ourselves alert and awake to anticipate the moving of God, to see God's hand on the move as much as to call out "there it is; it comes" as to particularly hold ourselves in tension lest we be caught unaware of a sudden judgement.

As we look toward the coming of God's love into the world, are we looking for a babe in swaddling clothes, a historical remembrance, all cuddly and warm, or are we ready to be part of God's revealing, power rending work? Are we ready to take on God's healing work among us and through us? Are we ready for our own foundations to be changed, for our lives and how we see ourselves in the world to take on a new cast—the cast of being part of God's revealing love? Are we ready to be part of that which turns the world upsidedown? Are we ready for the coming of the full measure of God's love with us? Are we ready to have this challenging promise become our words of hope, our words of comfort for this season? Are we ready for God to come that close?

God brought this season into being, and Oh, how the mountains have shook. God has shaken the mountains, and will shake them again. God has kindled the flames, and will kindle them again. God has come among us, is among us, and will be among us again. Forever. It is this hope, this reality, this promise that we await so desperately. In seeing our reality in both its brightness, and its shades of gray, that we can more truly say "Come, Lord, come and act, and become God with us for we are your children" and withstand the day of God's revealing love with courage and hope. May it be so, in this season, and all seasons. Amen.

**Responding**  
*Song*

*Confession*

O God of power and might,  
    we want you to tear open the heavens and come down,  
    yet we tremble and quake at the thought.  
We confess that even though we know your light,  
    we do not like the dark, empty void  
    where your Spirit hovers over the waters.  
We shake like leaves in the wind,  
    fearful of what you might ask,  
    afraid to trust you completely.  
Caught up in the swirling of our world  
    we struggle to “let it be.”  
Forgive us, O God.  
*(pause for silence)*

*Words of assurance*

O God, Emmanuel,  
    in Jesus, the Christ, you have come among us.  
    You have given us life, and we are restored.