

## **Worship From Home Resource**

**November 22, 2020**

Mark 13:24-37

*Additional Reflection on Isaiah 64:1-9*

### **Focus Theme:**

Reshape, Reclaim, Remember

### **Focus Prayer:**

Gracious God, As we go about our lives it is easy to forget, to get distracted, to wander astray, forgetting that it is in you that we find life and light. May we, O God, keep watch, stay awake, and remain present to your glory, your vision, and your justice. May we praise your unending mercy and participate in your mission of love for this world. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Focus Reading:** Mark 13: 24-37

But in those days, following that distress, 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.' At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'

### **All readings:**

Isaiah 64:1-9

Pslam 80:1-7, 17-19

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

### **Focus Questions:**

1. Where do you encounter God's vision for our world today?
2. How do you practice staying present in a world full of noise and distractions?
3. What does being "reshaped" and "reclaimed" mean to you?
4. What does "keeping watch" mean to you today?

### **Reflection:**

by Rev. Tim Seery

One of my friends from South America often finds himself amused at the way we North Americans like to schedule everything—even social time. If you were to open the calendar app on my phone right now you'd find that the next month is neatly organized, planned, and coordinated—both work and pleasure. Spontaneity is less of a value here, it seems. Many of us would hesitate before showing up to a friend's house completely unannounced, and it is not uncommon to plan that coffee catch-up date with our neighbor or classmate two or three weeks into the future. The reality is that modern life here is busy and most of us like to know exactly what is coming.

However, when we turn to Mark's gospel account it seems Jesus is asking us to consider the wisdom of my friend's less regimented, less scheduled, more spontaneous orientation toward life.

We are told rather pointedly, "Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come...for you do not know when the master of the house will come...or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly." Whew! There is A LOT to unpack here, especially if you're like me and the thought of unexpected guests makes you nervous. And this isn't just any ordinary guest either!

It is important to begin by reading Jesus' words that start out Mark 13. At the time Jerusalem had been destroyed, Christians were being persecuted, and Jesus is foretelling the destruction of the temple. Jesus is in the middle of a weighty discussion about what promises to be a confusing and tumultuous future. Just prior to the beginning of today's text he tells the disciples that there will be many false messiahs who will come and deceive the people during a time of great distress, anxiety, and tumult. This briefing that Jesus is providing to the disciples is certainly a nail-biter and not lacking in vivid imagery:

“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.” And, if you live in a part of the world with a climate conducive to fig trees, Jesus yet again provides another helpful hint: “As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door.”

Hmmm. Let's keep reading.

The final section of the passage gives us some very clear directives: “Be on guard! Be alert.” No one knows the day or the hour of the Son of Man's return—and so like a dutiful house sitter who has no idea when the house's owner is returning, we must stay awake, “Watch!” And not fall asleep lest our boss return in the middle of the night and find us, God forbid, sleeping.

So, where do we go with this?

This week, the lectionary pairs a reading from Isaiah (*Isaiah 64:1-9*) with this text from Mark. In it we hear, “O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” Indeed, a beautiful image of God shaping each of us, works of divine art nurtured in the palm of the Holy. This theme continues even into the Gospels. God is not done shaping, molding, and creating. God is, in Mark, more than ever, engaged with creation in a way that is intentional, nurturing, and concerned with justice.

God's is an ever-active presence in the world. This is a theme that runs through both the Old and New Testaments and an eternal truth that holds true even today. The text from Mark is not meant to alarm us, keep us awake all night, or terrify us about unexpected events. Rather, it is intended as a powerful image of the ways in which God's concern for justice is more urgent and more powerful than we might have imagined.

It is important to remember the time in which Jesus spoke these words. The Roman Empire would produce several self-proclaimed messiahs who would seek the worship of the populace. Jesus knew that there would be confusion about to whom and what our devotion and allegiance ought to be directed. He was aware that our vision of God's kingdom is limited and small and that we might be disoriented by the competing interests for our time and attention. He was aware that our attention might turn to other things and with it our devotion and ultimate vision.

Jesus uses fantastic imagery to set us straight: the kingdom of God is deeper, bigger, and made of a justice and mercy that we have yet to experience or know. I think Jesus is telling us to stay awake, to stay watchful, to always be ready. Why? Because this is how the potter's hand molds us into the best versions of ourselves. By being watchful, we are being present. It is in being present that we are being formed and reformed. Shaped and reshaped.

I am reminded of a course I took in seminary where we spent three hours looking at a

painting, and nothing else. In silence I warmed up to the idea that my eyes would have one refuge for the entirety of three hours and I got deeply and profoundly acquainted with every speck of paint, every smudge, every shadow. What this taught me was presence. Being ready, being aware, forces us to be present. Being present is an invitation for the presence of God.

There is fertile ground in this text to preach on presence, both to God and to each other. In what ways is the “art of noticing” a holy and spiritual act? Is the call to keep watch a call for us to bear witness? Is this a call for us to be acutely aware of the ways in which we might promote God’s love in places that need it—not only in our churches and in our personal circles but in an ailing wider world as well?

And what about this fig tree? Where I live, we don’t have fig trees.

I think that’s ok. It isn’t so much about the fig tree as it is about Jesus is telling us that by paying attention to even the small details of our world, by staying present, by keeping watch, we are not only reshaped but reclaimed. By being present to and grateful for the ordinary blessings of this life, by focusing our attention on the handiwork of God and not the machinations of empire, by tuning into the beauty of the world and not the empty promises of false messiahs or the many idols around us, we can be reclaimed by God and reshaped in the hand of the divine potter who is preparing us for God’s realm of justice and mercy.

There is also room in this text to preach about what this looks like specifically. In the age of COVID-19 and domestic and international turbulence it is impossible to consider sacred texts without considering our present reality. It is easy to be consumed by false information and bad science that tells us masks don’t matter and that we are independent of one another when the reality is that masks do work and that we owe it to each other to protect one another as we are interdependent beings in living and breathing communities. We need each other. Yet too many are waylaid following the advice of false prophets and self serving so-called “science” that turns away from the face of the divine and turns towards the face of something much less holy.

The Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt, in *Dancing with the Word*, writes, “This lesson reminds us once more that you and I are not in charge of the timeline—not the ultimate one or often even the ones that seem ultimate in our lives. Indeed, we hear that even Jesus didn’t know when that day would come. But even in our not knowing—perhaps especially in our not knowing we are called upon to live in such a way that we are aware of the certainty that our ‘ride is coming.’”

This is difficult for congregations to hear but so important to preach. It is natural to want to be in control of our own destiny, to have agency over our own timelines. Especially as Congregationalists, we love to have control and agency over our individual futures. However, God’s time is not our time. Deference to God’s time is in itself an act of worship and faith. This can be especially difficult to hear in times such as these when it already feels like

everything is so out of our control. However, we must remind our flocks that God is no stranger to times such as this. We are not the first—nor last—society to encounter such uncertainty and upheaval. It is in the midst of this uncertainty that the steps we take are holy and sacred—uncertain of the ground upon which we walk, yet confident that there is still more ground ahead of us.

Yet this is the good news: our ride is coming. The timeline is not up to us. But what is up to us, is what we do in the meantime. As we enter Advent, we can choose to be deluded by the spirits that seek to seduce us, the lies that we might believe, the untrue narratives that we might ascribe meaning to: that we are not enough, that we are independent of one another, that we need not be present to the beauty that surrounds us. Or, we can turn our eyes to the heavens, to the fig trees (or whatever trees surround us), and we can remember that we are always being shaped and reshaped by a creative and creating God—a Still Speaking God who has not finished with us yet. So we must keep awake. Keep watch. After all this is what Advent is all about. My friend might have been on to something. Ours is a spontaneous God who is always fixing to teach us something right when we are most unaware. Jesus showed up to the world unannounced, a surprise to even his parents at arguably not the most convenient time. God seems to care less about saving our calendars and more about saving us. I think I will take my head out of my well-organized, well-planned calendar in my phone and turn my eyes toward the trees, the sky, and all of God’s creation as I am reshaped and reclaimed by a God who is preparing me—and all of us—to participate in a realm of justice, equality, and mercy beyond our comprehension.

### **Reflection on Isaiah 64: 1-9**

The prophet is speaking on behalf of the people recognizing the people’s rejection of God but also their desire for God’s presence. The prophet bears all out in honesty when it is said, “No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you.” But in the very next verse there is a pivot: “Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.” It concludes with the admission and request: “look on us we pray, for we are all your people.”

There is something incredibly sweet and honest about this. The prophet is asking God to set God’s gaze on the people, as broken and sinful as they might be. They recognize that they have rejected God but yet they still seek God’s gaze and still claim that they belong to God. This might seem puzzling but it reflects a certain duality that is at the heart of our humanity.

We know that we frequently miss the mark yet we also know that it is in God that true rest lies. We know that we fall short but yet we know where we ultimately belong.

The prophet makes a great invitation to God here. The prophet invites God to do what God does: shape and reshape, form and reform. God as the potter is a beautiful image. If we remember what a potter is like we are taken to images of clay, of a kiln, of early memories in art class feeling the earthiness of clay in our hands. I can still smell the soil-like smell of clay from junior high art class. To be clay, or to be like clay is to be so organic... to be so

connected to the earth. There is a certain humility in this as well. The people rebelled against God yet recognize that they are earthy clay, to be shaped and molded like the soil of the ground.

Sometimes this is a good reminder. Sometimes we feel too powerful and when we do we turn away from God and think, for a moment, that we might be God. We are not. We are as much a part of God's creation as the soil, the sea, and the sky—we are no more or less important.

As humans we are complicated creatures. We have the power to both turn away from God and come closer. We must remember that we are works in progress in the palm of the potter's hand, just one small part of this ever-complicated and beautiful world.