

1Corinthians 1:3-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind - just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you - so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Additional scriptures printed below - after meditation: Isaiah 64: 1-9, and Mark 13

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Let's do a thought experiment. Close your eyes and imagine. Jesus walks in through one of those doors at the back into the sanctuary. Let's assume that it is really Jesus, and that somehow we all know that it is really Jesus. How do you react? Happy? Relieved? Apprehensive? Do you feel a need to look really pious? Do you feel a need to plan an impromptu potluck so we can host him well? Maybe you're thinking: oh good, we can replace that boring preacher. Maybe I'm thinking: oh good, I can find out what this text really means. Or maybe you're thinking: "you're late".

Let's put it a different way. How much do you want God to intervene in this world? It seems to me that we can divide up today's Christian church into 3 broad categories. There's the people who hold to rapture theology – that God is going to take his people up out of this sinful world. I don't want to say much about that particular interpretation of scripture, except to say that it seems to me to be somewhat contrary to the New Testament call to bring Christ's life into the world even if it means suffering for it. Jesus didn't abandon the world, but entered it, taking the form of a servant and suffering death to save it. Then in the second category are those who feel pretty comfortable about the way that things are, or else not too hopeful about God's ability to change them. For those people, divine intervention isn't a priority. And then there are those who

are in real suffering, or who perceive the world as being in a thorough mess, in the grip of systemic evil, and sense that only God can ultimately sort it out. Most of us, I suspect, are somewhere between the second and third categories. We have pretty comfortable lives, but when we look at the world we see injustice and suffering which we know at some deep intuitive level can only be sorted out by God.

Perhaps because we have pretty comfortable lives – we're not usually the ones suffering the injustices of the world - we don't always feel the same urgency that we heard in the reading from Isaiah. Whoever the author was – and scholars tend to view the later chapters of Isaiah as having been written not by Isaiah himself but by a later prophet in his tradition – he (or she) is desperate. Either in real life or through prophetic insight, the prophet sees Jerusalem destroyed by invading forces, the sins of the people continuing to drag the exiled nation down, and the God who gives life apparently absent. This prophet really feels a God-shaped gap in the nation. And so he – or she – begs God to come down and sort things out. I wish I was that passionate when I look at the world spiralling towards ecological crisis, the gross injustice meted out to the poor of the world, the wars, the violence, the racism, the loss of personal morality, and all those other things that we tend to moan about.

But is it enough to just ask God to clear up our mess? It seems to me that Jesus has some things to

say about this in the reading from Mark's gospel - though not necessarily the things which we see at first reading.

To explain what I mean by that, I need to go back to the beginning of the chapter. Chapter 13 begins with the disciples marvelling at the wonderful architecture of the temple, and Jesus telling them that it's going to be destroyed. On further questioning, he talks prophetically about the events which did indeed happen in CE 66 to 70 – the Romans' response to a Jewish insurrection would result in massive suffering, the destruction of the temple and the effective crushing of the

nation and its religion. And Jesus tells his disciples what to look out for – Roman idolatry in the Temple would mean the definitive end of an era. This chapter of Mark's gospel is not firstly about the end of the world, but about the end of that nation's culture and self-understanding. If you like, it was the end of their world.

But in that end was a beginning. Jewish Christians, driven to the ends of the earth as refugees, would carry the gospel with them. And so Jesus, “the Son of Man” would be seen in them, and God's Good News would be heard, all over the known world. The “great power and glory” is mediated through his faithful people.

And so the command which goes with the prophecy: Be alert. Be watchful. Stay awake. Look out for the signs of the times. And be ready to act, both to get out of Jerusalem when the time comes and to bring the love and the power of the resurrected Christ into whatever new situation you find yourself in.

16th century Anabaptists found themselves in a similar sort of situation. So did many of the grandparents of people in this congregation. History repeats itself.

So what does that mean for us today? I suggest that it is firstly a call to us to pray for insight into the direction which the world is taking. We don't have Jesus telling us about a specific event to look out for, but he has not left us without guidance. We have the Holy Spirit. We have the ability to see patterns in what is happening in the world. We have the carefully-researched conclusions of climate scientists and ecologists. And we have scriptural warnings as to what brings life and what kills it. Just to take an example, generosity and self-sacrifice brings life, and greed (covetousness, always wanting more) kills it.

And that brings me to a second practical meaning for today – live in a way which chooses life and blessing. Do acts of mercy and justice even if it makes us uncomfortable – maybe especially then.

As the prophet Micah put it, do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. And if we are caught up in a system which is dealing death to the world, find ways to steadily reduce our dependence on it. (That is why, for example, I've been working with people across the country in calling on Mennonite Church Canada to extricate itself from investments in fossil fuel corporations which seek to gain profit now at the expense of the very lives of future generations worldwide and the the most vulnerable today.)

My final practical lesson relies on being able to see the appalling events in 1st-century Jerusalem

from the vantage point of history. The Roman empire fell, but the church persisted and grew. In my lifetime I have seen, just to take 2 examples, the fall of Soviet communism and the fall of apartheid. Those who seek to dominate do not last forever. That applies to ISIS, it applies to the Taliban, it applies to irresponsible corporate capitalism. And it applies to all the bullying and injustices and namecalling that we may encounter in our personal lives. History is on the side of good – we have good reason to attach ourselves to Jesus even when things are difficult. Out of crucifixion comes resurrection. So cultivate hope and live in it.

In Revelation chapter 19 we read of the fall of Babylon, and I understand that to mean the end of all those petty Babylons throughout history, but also at some point a final end to all injustice, the fulfillment of the reign of God and the coming of Jesus in a more complete way. Amen - may it be so. Come, Lord Jesus! And may we give you the welcome you deserve.

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence -
as 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!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From 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.
You 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.
We 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.
There 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.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew

asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’ Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray. When you

hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed: this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

‘As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given

you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

‘But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose,

he has cut short those days. And if anyone says to you at that time, “Look! Here is the Messiah!” or “Look! There he is!” - do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be alert; I have already told you

everything.

‘But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. Then 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.

‘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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It 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. Therefore, 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’