

# Sermon: Advent 4

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December 3, 2017

Year A

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalms 80:1-7, 16-18

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

If Hollywood makes a movie... that's not a love story... then it's almost always a historical... fantasy... or science fiction story... about the conflict between good and evil... something like Schindler's List... or The Lord of the Rings... or Star Wars... these stories represent our stories... our conflicts... both with people we know... and those we don't... with how we care for the world... or not... and they represent our own inner conflicts... our inner struggles between good and evil too...

We read in scripture that we reap as we sow... we don't believe that God inflicts misfortune on us... but we also ask ourselves why bad things happen to good people... we ask ourselves why the circumstances in our lives don't always result directly from what we do... or fail to do... I think that's because the free will we have... allows us to behave in ways that align with God's will for us and for creation... or for those things which work against them...

We're told in Matt. 7:1... *Judge not... lest you yourself be judged*... but the divine spark in us... burns for justice... and it can be difficult... sometimes... to pass up an opportunity to help God mete out that justice... to rationalize why we ought not to... so we cheer... we whoop... we holler... perhaps only on the inside... when moral injury is healed... when law-breakers are caught... when evil-doers are brought to justice... like Little Finger in Game of Thrones... we see it as cosmic vindication... as a wrong which has been made right... as something broken which has been repaired...

And many of us... and our parents... and grandparents... and other ancestors... have... since the Industrial Revolution... experienced a greatly repaired standard of living... due to manufacturing... and technology... and automation... and more plentiful food... many

of us struggle with nothing more than first-world issues... though they may feel to us like third-world crises... but the world is a broken place... and it seems to me that many Americans are still waking up to that... that the bubble in which many of us have been living... the denial in which many of us have self-isolated... was broken on 9/11... when the normal... almost daily violence perpetrated around the world by those who do not know what they are doing... was brought to our front door...

It would have been extraordinarily difficult... to do nothing in response... it would have been impossibly hard... to let God alone mete out that justice... as God said in Romans 19... *Vengeance is mine... I will repay...* it would have taken extraordinary will power to squelch our survival instinct and be a silent witness to what had happened... but we did not... and Isaiah declares... that all of our righteous deeds have become like a filthy cloth... but still... he asks God to tear open the Heavens... and come down... to make God's name known to our adversaries... the prophet says... *You did this when we least expected it... for your own sake... do it again... remember... we are your people...*

And yet... even so... in some incomprehensible way... the Epistle reminds us... that Jesus will strengthen us to the end... so that on the day of his coming... we will be found blameless...

There is brokenness... but there is also immeasurable beauty in creation... there is sinfulness... but there is breathtaking redemption expressed in relationship... there is selfishness... but there is also unmerited generosity and self-emptying... yet we hang on to our corporate denial... we engage in magical thinking... when we think that our mental will-power alone... can save save more Jews... or throw the One Ring into the fire of Mt. Doom... or deliver the life-saving torpedo into the heart of the Death Star...

Today's Gospel talks about our star and moon darkening... about stars falling from Heaven... it is apocalyptic... it scares us... it makes us think about the end times... about the final judgment... it points to a world falling apart... and it is possible... that

with as much senseless male bravado... and saber rattling... that's being lobbed back and forth between Washington and North Korea... it is possible... that there are parts of the world that might well fall apart... that might endure suffering... but we hang on to faith...

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs said that in Judaism... faith is not acceptance... but protest... against the world that is... in the name of the world that ought to be... and the Talmud encourages us to not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief... and reassures us that while we are not obligated to complete the work... neither are we free to abandon it...

But what's even more terrifying... I think... than our outer world falling apart... what may feel harder to manage... is when our own inner world... falls apart... when the opinions... and assumptions... and myopic world view... which we have absolutized and projected onto others all our lives... fail to serve us any longer... what's even more terrifying... I think... is the suffering that the acknowledgement of our own brokenness creates... because we prefer to look at almost anything else... except suffering... because suffering can change us... and we don't want to change...

We are called to wake up to our own inner inner darkness... which contributes to the darkness of the world... but we don't want to wake up... and so we rationalize that someone else ought to be responsible... someone else ought to be held accountable... and if we can rationalize that... then we can rationalize staying... or even falling asleep...

So how do we stop rationalizing... how do we stand as silent witnesses to the pain around us... how do we stop rationalizing... that inflicting pain on others will take away the pain we feel in response to circumstances that are out of our control... how do we become silent witnesses as Jesus did... when he hung on the Cross because of the

pain his accusers felt... how do we reject the need to flee... or the need to fight... and simply remain as a silent witness... to the judgement that others project on to us...

Seek Wisdom... keep awake... seek Wisdom... keep awake... over and over scripture exhorts us to know who we are... and all that we do... and why we do what we do... and how it affects others... or to be open when they tell us... and have fierce conversations when needed... and seek forgiveness as we have been forgiven... so we must ask ourselves... what is it to be human... what is it to know who we are and who we're not... what is it to live reverent lives in... as they say... the fear of the Lord... what is it to care for creation... as stewards of the environment and not as those who get as much out of it as we can... and just leave the carnage to future generations... what is it to care for each other... not only in our nuclear families... but in our national families... and our global families...

Perhaps part of how we stop rationalizing... is to seek Wisdom... stay awake... and keep our eyes on the Cross... but in the flow of Advent that we've inherited... which fast tracks us directly to Christmas morning... we can hardly grasp the new promise we find there... in the flow of Advent... we can barely imagine a God who accepts crucifixion... but who says... *Not even this... can keep me from loving them...* in the flow of Advent... we can scarcely fathom... the depth of love... that forgives Deicide... the killing of God...

But our wounds connect us to others in the world who are wounded too... our wounds connect us to the wounds of Christ... the taunting I received when I was growing up... is the taunting Jesus received... the rejection I felt for being who I am... is the rejection Jesus felt for being who he is... when my world fell apart because what I was called to a new life... Jesus' world fell apart too when he was called to a new life... but as Romans 6 reminds all of us... *For if we have been united with him in a death like his... we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his...* part of how we stop our insane rationalizing... is by not looking at the sky... but by looking at the Cross...

If the Gospel is God's story... and our story too... if our lives... and words... and actions... are not constrained by a movie script... because we have free will... collective free will... and a certain degree of self-determinism... then we can do all we can... to write the ending of our collective story too...

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