

Community Responsibility

^{NRS} **Isaiah 64:1** O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence--² 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!³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

^{NRS} **Mark 13:24** "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.²⁶ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.²⁷ 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.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.²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.³¹ Heaven 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. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

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It's probably fair to say that a little over half of the people in this country are relatively pleased with the results of the election. It's also probably accurate to say that almost half of our citizens are on a spectrum ranging from disappointed to total despair over the election. There is bad news wherever you turn – locally, nationally, and around the world. At the moment, we hear a lot about gridlock in Washington, school shootings, Ebola in Africa, terrorism everywhere, drug busts, and on and on the list goes.

When I read today's passages from Isaiah and Mark, my first reaction wasn't, "Wonderful! This will lift everybody's spirits!" Nonetheless, these two texts may be just the message that we need to hear. Isaiah begins by asking God to be present in some spectacular way. "God, come rescue us! Make the mountains shake! Come with fire and power! Do some of that divine shock and awe!"

However, Isaiah also says, "You have hidden your face from us," and "we sinned" and "all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth." The Hebrew here is especially earthy and the translators revise it for polite company. What's being emphasized is the immense gulf between God and his people. Isaiah acknowledges the sins of the people and how God is notably absent. Still, Isaiah hopes for a mighty presence of God like there was at Mount Sinai, for example. This chasm between Israel and God makes two points. First, the nation of Israel belongs to God - but God doesn't belong to Israel. God can't be contained or controlled by Israel. Second, it seems that in the withdrawal of

God's protection, the suffering of the Israelites may wake them up to the fact that their sin has consequences.

Today, we almost always speak of salvation in personal terms. We talk about our one-on-one relationship with God, and about Jesus as our personal savior. But Isaiah is confronted with the issue of "Are we saved?" It's a group issue, a corporate situation, a need for a whole people to be redeemed from their suffering. In our culture where individualism is so greatly emphasized, we have little, if any, concept of corporate, meaning community, sin. We can't imagine how we can be intertwined with the failings of others. I'm not responsible for the misbehavior of someone next door, much less people in some other town or state or country.

This is a concept that I have had to wrestle with. I've always had enough difficulty trying, first, to know what I should do, and second, and even more difficult, to try to discipline myself to comply with what I should be doing. That's generally been more than I could accomplish, and I sure didn't feel like I needed to be held responsible for some sort of foggy concept like corporate sin. And we're a little surprised if and when the suggestion is made that we've participated in some sort of general community sin, some corporate sin. And, if you're like me, you heartily resent the effort of someone trying to heap guilt on you for something in which you weren't personally involved.

It's useful to remember what sin is. Sin is missing the target that has been placed before us. Sin is being off the mark. Sin is what separates us from God. The target, the bull's-eye, is being in harmony with God, living a Christ-like life, being filled with the Holy Spirit, and being so filled with God's love that it just pours out of us onto everyone we meet or touch. That's the target, and we all miss it, we all sin. We get headed off in the wrong direction and we need to repent, we need to change direction, so that we are pointed toward that target.

And current events dramatically illustrate how we - as a community - can be missing the mark, how we can drift off in directions that widen the gap between us and God. We look for the cause of troubles, but usually stop looking once we reach a point where there's somebody to blame, somebody other than ourselves. We bemoan the disappearance of the small local business and we blame the mega discount chains while we ignore our complicity in our own choice of where to shop. We complain about smoggy polluted air, but we only began to change our driving habits and our choices in vehicles when the price of gasoline increased so tremendously that the cost got our attention. "Let the buyer beware" rules the day and "Do to others as you would want to be treated" is trampled underfoot. We put our trust in Adam Smith's theory of the "invisible hand" while we keep the hand of Christian compassion in our pocket. We are more focused on individual gain than we are on the common good. I confess, I have failed to communicate with any elected official that is supposed to represent me. I have not urged more support for public education, better care for the environment, or more compassion for the sick, the poor, and the powerless. And because many others are like me, there are other nations that have healthier citizens, cleaner streams, and better educated children than we do. The gap between our people and our Maker has become wide and God appears now, just as in Isaiah's time, to be letting us stew in our own juice and suffer the consequences of our actions.

But Isaiah doesn't stop there and neither must we. Isaiah appeals to God. That in itself is an indication of repentance. Remember that the word repent doesn't mean feel guilty; it means change direction. By turning from reliance on ourselves and our

individual prosperity and turning to God, we move our line of sight from self to Creator. When we reach out to help the poor, the hungry, the broken family, and the sick, we're not only caring for the least among us, but Jesus says we're caring for him. And we move beyond love of self to love for others. These are changes in direction not only for our individual lives, but for us as a people. That's a good change in direction! And Isaiah trusts God to be God, to remember his people, to be merciful, to mold the people as a potter molds the clay. There's the good news, God will be God. God will be compassionate and merciful and filled with steadfast love.

Isaiah wanted God to intervene on the part of the people in a dramatic and powerful way. Well, that didn't happen. But God did anoint a leader to do the Lord's work. King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and sent the Jews back home to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. (Isaiah 45:1) The Lord moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform.

The gospel lesson in Mark is also about terrible times. Our tendency is to look in this passage to get an indication for when the end times will be. Of course, we slide right over the clear admonition that no one knows when that will be. It's that pride thing popping up again. The angels don't know, the Son doesn't know, but I think I should know. When we try to take the signs of the end literally and the statement that no one knows when figuratively, we have it backwards. We need to take this passage seriously, very seriously. When things are falling apart, when we're surrounded by catastrophe and drowning in troubles, when it seems like the sky is falling, then look through the fog of confusion and cast your eyes on Christ and he will strengthen and support you. The dire situation that Jesus describes happens not once, but again and again. About the time when the gospel of Mark was written, Jerusalem was trampled and crushed as the Romans put down a rebellion. Once again, as in the time of Isaiah, the temple was destroyed. But those who looked to Jesus were strengthened and supported by their trust in Christ. The church not only survived, but continued to spread and grow stronger. Be vigilant. Be watchful. Troubles will come and we will need our Savior even more than usual. Be vigilant. Be watchful. Look for Christ in the hungry and the homeless. Look for the image of God in your neighbor. Be vigilant. Be watchful. Salvation may come unexpectedly, in a Persian king or a peasant child born in unassuming circumstances. Amen.

Be vigilant! Look for Christ in the hungry,
the homeless, and the stranger.
Use your political responsibility to encourage
directions that point us toward God.