Sermon and Readings First Sunday of Advent 29th November 2026

Isaiah 64.1–9

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 for ever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Psalm 80.1–7, 17–19

1 Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, you that led Joseph like a flock:
you that are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine out in glory;
2 Before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh:
stir up your power, and come to save us.
3 Restore us again, O Lord of hosts:
show us the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.
4 O Lord God of hosts:
how long will you be angry at your people's prayer?
5 You have fed them with the bread of tears:
and given them tears to drink in good measure.
6 You have made us the victim of our neighbours:
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.
7 Restore us again, O Lord of hosts:
show us the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.
17 Let your power rest on the man at your right hand:

on that son of man whom you made so strong for yourself.
18 And so we shall not turn back from you:
give us life, and we will call upon your name.
19 Restore us again, O Lord of hosts:
show us the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

1 Corinthians 1.1–9

1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother
Sosthenes, 2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified
in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call
on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: 3 Grace to you
and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I give thanks to my
God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in
Christ Jesus, 5 for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and
knowledge of every kind— 6 just as the testimony of Christ has been
strengthened among you— 7 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as
you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. 8 He will also strengthen you
to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus
Christ. 9 God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13.24–37

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. 33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not
know when the time will come. 34 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. [35] 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, [36] or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. [37] And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Sermon

Each year, on the first Sunday of the new church year, we do something odd. When the shopping centres are already playing carols, the churches readings open with darkened skies, falling stars and the Son of Man coming on the clouds. We came for the manger and got the end of the world.

That's deliberate. Advent doesn't begin with a baby, but with a question: *what do you do when you're waiting for God, and God seems to be taking a long time?*

Isaiah gives us the most honest prayer in the Bible. His people are back from exile, the temple is in ruins, and the glorious restoration they'd been promised hasn't arrived. Thus, he prays with more nerve than elegance: *tear open the heavens and come down.* He doesn't ask God to bump things along or to send a sign. He wants God to rip the sky.

Notice that he doesn't pretend. He admits that God was angry, that "we sinned", that "we have all become like one who is unclean." But then comes the twist, which I think is the hinge of the whole season: *"Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter."*

That one word, *'yet'*, holds the whole of Advent faith. Nothing here has improved. God still seems absent and the people are still a mess. And we say: *yet you are our Father.* Advent faith doesn't wait because things look hopeful. It waits because of who God is.

The psalm says the same thing as a refrain: "[7] **Restore us again, O Lord of hosts: show us the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.**
" Said once it's a prayer, said three times it's a heartbeat. Some of you have prayed like that this year, in a hospital room, over a marriage, or for a child who has drifted away. You know that praying isn't always tidy. Sometimes it is just saying the same words again, *restore us*, and trusting that God hears the third time as well as the first.

If Isaiah and the psalmist give us longing, Paul gives us ground to stand on. He writes to the Corinthians, who are about the least impressive congregation in the New Testament. They are divided, posers, confused about almost everything. And yet his opening words are thanksgiving: you are "not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Look at the phrase *as you wait.* Paul doesn't treat waiting as the empty bit before the real thing starts. The waiting is itself the setting in which God is already at work, enriching and strengthening them. And the reason is not the Corinthians' track record. "God is faithful," he says, the God who called you into fellowship with his Son.

When the church waits, we aren't a crowd stuck at the bus station with no timetable. We have been called, and the one who called us is faithful. Our waiting rests on his promise, not on how we are doing.

Then Mark, has a warning I'd like us not to rush past. Jesus tells the disciples a small parable: a householder goes away and leaves his servants in charge, each with their own work, and the doorkeeper is told to watch. "Keep awake," he says. He says several times in four verses, and the last time he says it to everyone: "What I say to you I say to all."

Be careful what you think he means. Staying awake isn't anxious speculation. Every generation has had its prophets with charts and dates, and Jesus shuts that down in the same breath: "about that day or hour no one knows." Nor is it a nervous kind of belief that sits twitching at the window.

The servants in the parable each have *their own work.* To keep awake is to be found faithfully doing the thing you were given to do, whether that is teaching a Sunday school class, caring for an elderly parent, helping out at the Garage Sale, sitting with the lonely, or being honest in a workplace where nobody would notice if you weren't. The opposite of sleep isn't panic. It is attentiveness: living as though God is real and the future is his.

And Jesus warns about the danger of drifting off, a slow numbness in which we stop expecting anything. Our danger isn't usually that we reject Christ's coming but that we stop *noticing*, until a church that prays "Your kingdom come" every week no longer quite expects it to.

Where this leaves us

Well here is Advent in three movements, all packed into today's readings.

Dare to long. Pray Isaiah's honest, desperate prayer, and don't tidy it up. God can handle a lament, and it's often the beginning of hope.

Stand on God's faithfulness. Not on your faith, which wobbles, or the church's record, which is mixed, but on the one who called you and "will strengthen you to the end."

Keep awake. Do your work, watch for him, and expect him.

The curtain of the sky did get torn open, not in thunder but in a stable and, years later, over a cross, where the veil was torn from top to bottom. The God Isaiah begged to come down did come down, and he will come again. Between those two comings is where we live, waiting, working and watching.

Let our first lit Advent candle this morning be a small act of boldness against the dark. As we continue to pray the oldest prayer of the church: *Come, Lord Jesus.* Amen.