

ARE YOU PREPARED?

Isaiah 64: 1-9; Mark 13: 24-37

It started when he lost his job. Jack had been with the company for years. He thought his position was secure. But after his company was bought by another company there was a shakeup. He got the pink slip. Jack was given some compensation. Even though he was upset about losing his job, he thought a little time off would be a good thing for him and his family. He'd have more time with the children and more time with his wife Cindy. He'd also take some time to ponder what he wanted to do and where he wanted to go next with his career.

Well, a year came and went with many interviews, calls and contacts; but nothing good, nothing solid, nothing meaningful came of it. Jack started to feel stress. The more nothing happened, and the more finances became precarious, the stress increased. Sleep became a problem. Jack's mind couldn't turn off. Doomsday scenarios kept playing out in his head. He had to find a way to relax. Jack started to drink... a lot. He needed to numb himself, take the sting out of the stress and worry. Nothing happened on the job front. Bills were piling up unpaid as income was shrinking. Beyond the stress and worry, now, Jack was feeling a growing impatience and anger building up inside him. It was coming out more and more frequently toward everyone and everything. Relationships became strained. Jack began to isolate himself more and more. More and more time was spent on the couch with a bottle or two close by. Things were getting worse.

Cindy started to challenge Jack. "Get some help Jack. If not for yourself, for us and the boys. Please..." But Jack seemed to be past that, falling deeper and deeper into a pit. Eventually, the house had to be sold. Eventually, Cindy took the boys and left. Eventually, Jack was on the street. Eventually, he was in the hospital all cut up and bruised with a skull fracture. Only after hitting rock bottom did Jack realize he needed help. I met Jack after years on a road of recovery...

So, what does crisis mean for you and me? Not only what we ourselves have been through, but maybe something we fear may happen. What does crisis mean for you and me?

It may be a crisis in one of our primary relationships with someone close to us.

- They tell us they are no longer in love with us. Or we realize we are no longer in love with them.
- They tell us they don't want to go to school anymore.
- They tell us the same things over and over again.
- They tell us things that so upset us we can't imagine the relationship continuing as it is.

And this is just about relationships. What about health? That's a whole other thing. If we live long enough, as so many of you know, what will strike us first? second? third? What will do us in or change the quality of our lives forever? What will we

have to give up? Who that is close to us and whom we love dearly, will be struck by illness, accident or something else? How will that impinge on the quality of our lives, our freedom, our sense of responsibility?

You know I can go on, can't you? Things come at us all the time, things that we can never anticipate, plan for or control. And even if we think something may come, we always hope for some better possibility, some greater outcome. Things don't have to turn out the way they often do. And so, we struggle with our fears and hopes, our worries and our dreams. We fear the worst but hope for the best.

On this first Sunday of Advent, as we consider our scripture readings, this is the core issue that presents itself to us. How do we live in the present when we know full well that any number of things can go wrong or change our lives forever in the days to come? How do we live fully alive but prepared; free and open but also ready?

Advent means "coming." Jesus is coming. Christmas is coming. Early Christians lived a vivid sense that between Jesus' resurrection and his coming again, they were called to live a certain way each day, a way that was empowered, faithful, and grace-filled, rooted in God's Spirit. But how do we do this? Wisdom is needed and courage. Grace is needed and God's Spirit.

Well, if we want some of this... if we want wisdom, courage, grace, and God's Spirit to walk the journey, then let's ponder our scripture readings for some guidance.

First, our reading from Isaiah. What is the situation the people face? There is trouble. There are hard times. The people are surrounded by enemies. God seems far away. Deliverance seems a distant dream. And so, they pray: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence..." And they remember what they have been taught as a people: "God works for those who wait for God. God meets those who gladly do right, those who remember God and how God works."

But this hasn't worked. Some of the people have given up on faith. If God won't help, let's give our hearts and souls to other gods. Maybe another god can make a more tangible difference in our lives.

And then there are others who have just stopped feeling and trying altogether – apathy and defeat, fatalism and a numbing indifference is a way of coping with repeated disappointment and heart-break. Life is more bearable that way, no?

Well, I propose that the way Israel responded to God's apparent absence, is the way we often respond to the crises that come upon us. Think about it. When crisis comes we can feel weighed down, overwhelmed, bewildered, disoriented. If there is no solution or resolution in any clear, immediate way, we begin to panic. We can flail about emotionally and we can act precipitously. We do things without thinking, make changes, jump into this or get out of that.

Or else, we shut down and try to pretend life goes on as it always has. Whatever anchor has held our lives in place has been thrown off. We are now in a stormy sea

trying to find something stable to hold onto.... And if this doesn't happen soon enough, we can develop an impatient reactivity to things; or, we develop a fatalism and hopelessness because life can never be the way it was and nothing else will ever be good enough.

Think about any crisis you've lived or are living. The core issues are the same. They have to do with relationships, finances, social stability, health, loss, happiness or misery in our school or work... and then there are larger issues to make us worry – the economy, the environment, terrorism, a pandemic, fires, floods, storms and earthquakes....

So how do we respond? Do we panic and act without thinking? Do we react by blaming and shaming someone else? Do we obsess on the supposed source of the problem, get wound up, yet further powerless to do much about it? Or, do we simply numb ourselves to our feelings and cut out our caring, listening and loving because it hurts too much?

In any of these ways, we are essentially abandoning our trust in God. We are refusing to wait upon strength, inspiration and wisdom from God to come to us? Wisdom and inspiration don't come from acting quickly. Wisdom and inspiration come from waiting openly, listening to the voices of others and the deeper voice of courage and grace within us. It may be that some things may have to change. It may be that some things cannot be changed. It may even be that we'll have to give up something we've always treasured, loved and depended on. But, something new may come that will be rich and beautiful and special in a way we could never have known before. Are we open to this possibility? Do we believe in God that way?

Well, how do we prepare ourselves for this kind of faith, for this new way of being? How do we navigate the waters of panic, reactivity, and numbness when crisis hits and we feel overwhelmed?

Jesus tells us the way in our gospel reading. He offers counsel to his followers so that they are prepared for what's coming. To be prepared they need to cultivate the garden of their souls. They need to develop strength and stability of spirit by practicing certain things. What will cultivate the garden of your soul? What kinds of practices will give you inner strength and stability? Will prayer, meditation and worship do it? Will special relationships of mutual support do it? Will practices that involve art and music, study, fellowship and volunteering do it? There are many ways to cultivate the garden of our souls. By doing this we keep awake and alert, as Jesus tells us. By doing this we are prepared to see the signs, signs of what's coming, signs of what may come.

In particular, we develop the strength and stability to do two things. First, as a crisis comes, we learn how to face change. In many cases what we need in order to face change is empowerment to act. Instead of just staying paralyzed, or reacting in negative ways of blaming and shaming, or going numb and shut down, we are empowered to take steps to change our lives. We make choices in our relationships, changing certain things or letting go certain things. We make changes in our financial expectations or practices or our work. We make changes

in our lifestyles or the kinds of things we do with our time and energy. Empowerment for change and the right kind of change, though, can only come if we cultivate the garden of our souls.

Second, besides empowerment for change, we need freedom to accept what cannot be changed, freedom to let go. We suffer so much because we are attached to things we must let go. These things aren't necessarily bad in and of themselves. People aren't bad. Jobs aren't bad. Many preoccupations and practices in our lives aren't bad. But as crisis comes and change comes we need to discover the freedom to let go, to accept, to allow a new way of being to come to be in our lives. Some things are not bad now but may become bad for us when life changes. We may have to let go certain relationships, certain habits of lifestyle, certain dreams, certain things we cannot imagine we could live without. But to move forward we have to let them go.

Empowerment to change.... Freedom to accept, to let go.... This can only come if we are able to cultivate the garden of our souls. Such cultivation prepares us for what may come. We are better able to see the signs. We are more alert, awake, strong and grounded. This is what Jesus counsels to his followers.

So what practices will cultivate the garden of your souls? May such cultivation include the spiritual practices offered by the church, practices that deepen our faith in God and our bond with the Spirit of Jesus...

Let us pray: Come to us divine Spirit... empower us for change we choose in the face of changes that have come we have not chosen... empower us to find our way to acceptance so that fresh wisdom, beauty and meaning may also come... You can do all things, O God... As we eat and drink in communion with our Lord Jesus, may our faith in you be ignited... Amen.