

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – December 3, 2017

[Isaiah 64:1-9](#) & [Mark 13:24-37](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

Reflection Questions on Isaiah 64:1-9:

1. Have you ever been (or are you now) experiencing such a terrible time that you could join in the opening lines of this scripture, crying for God to “tear open the heavens and come down”, so that the nations might tremble? If so, can you relate to the mood of this passage? If not, how might you relate your own experience to these words?
2. This passage ends with a petition for God to remember that “we are all your people”. (v 9) Who is the “we” to whom Isaiah refers? Israel? People of faith? All humanity? Does your response to this passage change if you imagine a different subject?
3. One commentator has pointed out that this passage revolves around three expressions that confront a reader’s feeling of distance or separation of God – ... “O...”(v.1), “But...” (v.5b), and “Yet... (v.8). How might you adapt this pattern to describe your own relationship with God? (See brief commentary from Rev. Dr. John Fairless: <https://lectionarylab.com/2014/11/24/the-first-sunday-of-advent-for-year-b-november-30-2014/>)

Reflection Questions on Mark 13:24-37:

1. Again this week, we have Jesus speaking about apocalyptic matters. Should we understand Jesus to be speaking literally or metaphorically here?
2. Anyone else bothered by the judgmental tone of this passage? Since the gospel is to be “good news”, where do you find that in this passage?
3. This passage falls on the first Sunday of Advent, largely because of its emphasis on keeping alert, awake, and attentive to that which is coming. In this context, we likely won’t be expecting an apocalyptic end in the imminent future. So what are we really waiting for? For what are we to be alert and attentive?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?

Commentary on Isaiah 64:1-9 (From the *Homiletics* archive; “Christians Behaving Badly” – Nov. 30, 2014

Today's reading from Isaiah (64:1-9) is a portion from a long communal lament that extends from 63:7 to 64:12 (the end of chapter 64). The gist of that lament is an appeal to God for help and mercy for a worshiping community that finds itself in dire circumstances. Scholars since the time of Bernhard Duhm (in his commentary on Isaiah, published in 1892) have recognized that the last chapters of the book of Isaiah (specifically, chapters 56-66) seem to come from someone writing in post-exilic Israel during the early, difficult years of the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the reconstitution of the worshiping community centered on the temple there. Today's reading reflects the tensions, frustrations and uncertainties of that period.

The lament begins with a typical recitation of the *magnalia Dei*, the mighty works of God on Israel's behalf (63:7-14), followed by the petition for compassion, which includes today's reading (63:15-64:12, with minor insertions, such as the confession of sin in vv. 5-7).

The line of thought beseeching God (addressed here by his *nom particulier*, Yahweh, rendered as "the LORD") to "come down" from heaven (v. 1) begins at 63:15, "Look down from heaven and see." The idea of heaven as the abode of the deity was, of course, a theological commonplace, not only in the religion of ancient Israel, but in surrounding cultures, as well. But a concomitant theologoumenon was the idea of divine immanence or terrestrial presence, usually in the form of a theophanic manifestation. Thus, in both mythic (e.g., Genesis 3:8-9) and epic materials (e.g., Genesis 18:1; Exodus 3:1-4), Israel's God appeared in history as one form of revelation. Isaiah's imagery here, of the *deus absconditus*, is part of the tradition that includes the portion of Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple that acknowledges, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27).

The notion of God's remoteness, while not new in Isaiah, is given a particular twist in this passage, beginning with the complaint voiced at 63:17, "Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart ..." (see also v. 5b). The absence of God is more than the lack of a deliverer; it is the removal of that guardian power that has allowed Israel, throughout its history, to cleave to paths of justice and righteousness. When the prophet beseeches the Lord to "tear open the heavens and come down," it is for the sake of allowing Israel to return to its partnership with its God.

The text of verse 5 is quite uncertain, and the translation in NRSV depends on emending the text (and linking the passage to the thought expressed in 63:17). Another translation (JPS) reads, "We have been steeped in them from of old, and can we be saved?"

The language of verse 1b (and 3b) -- "so that the mountains would quake at your presence" -- draws on the very ancient imagery of the theophany at Sinai, found in Judges 5:5 ("The mountains quaked before the LORD, the One of Sinai"), Exodus 19:18 ("Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently"), and earlier in the book of Isaiah itself (5:25, "Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them; the mountains quaked, and their corpses were like refuse in the streets"). (See also Psalm 68:7-8; Habakkuk 3:2-15.) Isaiah is drawing on the ancient tradition of Yahweh's salvific presence in Israel's midst, but is developing it here to include the subduing of Yahweh's (and, naturally, Israel's) enemies ("to make your name known

to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!"). Yahweh's violent presence at Sinai, in the earliest layers of the tradition, had been exclusively for Israel's benefit and witnessed exclusively by Israel; here in Isaiah, the request for that same divine presence is made not only for Israel's benefit, but also for the shock and awe of those who have brought Israel to its current grievous condition (cf. Psalm 79:5-13).

Verse 4 is one of the relatively few verses in the OT expressing what might be called "absolute monotheism," that is, the assertion that not only are other gods ineffectual or subservient to Yahweh, but they do not, in fact, exist at all. In most of the OT, the existence of deities other than Yahweh is taken for granted (see, e.g., Joshua 24:14-15), and the issue enjoined for most of biblical history was whether Israel would serve Yahweh faithfully ("You shall have no other gods before [or besides] me," Exodus 20:3) or apostatize to or syncretize with other deities (especially Baal).

By the time of Isaiah, however (and perhaps even earlier -- see Deuteronomy 4:28), the idea that other deities were simple illusions of the human mind, whereas Yahweh was the only real God, had begun to exert itself, as it does in verse 4. Although the book of Isaiah draws heavily on creation imagery, in this passage it is the social manifestation of the deity that is the prophet's concern.

Ethical concerns are never far from the writer(s) of Isaiah. Unlike the nature deities of Israel's Canaanite neighbors (such as Baal), Yahweh was preeminently a social and ethical deity ("the God of your ancestors," is the standard formula expressing that essentially social nature, Exodus 3:13, 15, 16; Deuteronomy 1:11, 21; 4:1; 6:3; 12:1; etc.). The knowledge of Yahweh was never confined to the natural realm, but was always also found in right behavior ("You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways," v. 5). Proper conduct was defined by how closely one adhered to the "statutes and ordinances" given through prophetic revelation, beginning with Moses (Exodus 33:13; see also Deuteronomy 4:1, 5, 6, 8, 14 and many others).

The rendering of the Hebrew *beged`iddim* in verse 6 as "a filthy cloth" shields the English reader from the graphic "menstrual pad" actually found in the text (literally, "garment of menstruations," which even the editors of BDB could not bring themselves to state explicitly; see p. 723b). Menstruation was, of course, a source of ritual uncleanness in ancient Israel (Leviticus 18:19; Ezekiel 18:6; 36:17), as was the corresponding (so it was thought) male counterpart (Leviticus 15:1-15; cf. vv. 19-33). One of the marks of the patriarchal orientation of the biblical text is that whereas female uncleanness was taken up in prophetic literature as a metaphor for Israel's sins, male uncleanness was never so extended.

Although the image of God as father is common in the NT, in the OT it is rare, occurring only some 15 times (Deuteronomy 32:6; Isaiah 63:16 (twice) and 64:7; Jeremiah 3:4, 19; 31:9; Malachi 1:6; 2:10 -- all with reference to God as the father of the nation of Israel; and 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Psalm 68:5; 89:26 -- with reference to God as an individual's father; see also Tobit 13:4 and other passages where the idea is implied). In the main, Israelite theology did not include the notion of humans as divine offspring (except, perhaps, in the case of royal adoption, Psalm 2:7), but rather as the image and likeness of the divine (Genesis 1:26). The reference here to Yahweh as Israel's Father is, therefore, outside the mainstream of ancient Israelite thought -- which is where the book of Isaiah often is.

Commentary on Mark 13:24-37

(From *Homiletics*; "From Fad to Foundation" – Dec. 3, 2017)

Mark 13:24-37 is the latter half of a notoriously difficult passage to interpret. The pericope is also part of a larger setting when Jesus responds to questions asked privately by Peter, James, John and Andrew (the first disciples called by Jesus in Mark, vid. 1:16-20). After learning that the temple will be destroyed, they ask, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" (vv. 2-4). Neither wars, earthquakes, famines nor persecution presage "these things" (vv.

5-13). Rather, "the sign" for "these things" is "the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be" (v. 14). Though the specific identity of this event remains elusive, one explanation for this phrase is Titus' sacrilegious entry into the Holy of Holies, the blasphemous sacrifices by his soldiers on the temple grounds and the idolatrous proclamation of him as "Imperator" when he conquered Jerusalem (vid. S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967], 230ff). Despite these interpretative challenges, one noteworthy leitmotif unites the entire chapter, namely, the disciples are repeatedly told to "beware," "be alert," "keep alert" and "keep awake" (cf. vv. 5, 9, 23, 33, 35, 37).

Indeed, the fact that Jesus neither dwells on nor furnishes any exact chronological details is striking. For, after he describes several circumstances that might lead the disciples astray (i.e., messianic pretenders, recurring events such as wars and earthquakes and the suffering associated with "the desolating sacrilege"; vid. vv. 5-23), he immediately says, "But in those days, after that suffering" (v. 24; for "those days" cf. vv. 17, 19-20). Undoubtedly, the disciples' emotions -- perhaps apprehension, anticipation or both -- were already elevated by what Jesus had already said. But now their feelings were likely intensified even further -- they might be wondering what additional cataclysmic events could possibly follow "that suffering."

Though no one knows with certitude what the disciples expected Jesus to say, the apocalyptic imagery in verses 24-25 must have been disconcerting. The language reflects a common motif in the prophetic literature of the OT (e.g., Isaiah 13:10; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 31; Amos 8:9). It is a graphic, poetic saying that unsettles and disturbs. Celestial orbs whose routine presence each day and night normally conveys a sense of constancy and reassurance will no longer give forth their light. Instead, "the sun will be darkened, / and the moon will not give its light, / and the stars will be falling from heaven" (vv. 24b-25a). This imminent cosmic disturbance not only includes the spheres of heaven, but also extends to "the powers in the heavens ... [which] ... will be shaken" (v. 25b). The latter disruption is particularly alarming because many people in antiquity believed that "the powers in the heavens" governed everyday affairs on earth.

Though one could argue that Jesus is predicting a literal darkening of the heavenly spheres, it seems more likely that he is alluding to a time of tremendous upheaval. In order to extend the imagery and deepen the angst his disciples (and Mark's readers) experience, Jesus incorporates another OT motif when he declares, "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory" (v. 26). This expression is especially disconcerting for political entities, since "the Son of Man" will be "given dominion and glory and kingship" (vid. Daniel 7:13-14). With his coming, fortunes will be reversed, because "he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds" (v. 27). In sum, the elect -- namely, those not led astray -- who were formerly scattered, will now be reunited under the sovereignty of "the Son of Man" who has the authority to disrupt the heavens and shake oppressive, self-serving earthly regimes.

In verses 28-31, Jesus summarizes his reply to the disciples. The metaphor of the fig tree illustrates the proximity of "these things." Jesus says to his disciples, "When you see these things taking place, you know that he [or, it] is near" (v. 29). Nearness is further stressed in verse 30 when he says, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." The certainty that "these things" will happen is then guaranteed with a familiar, though adapted, gospel truism: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (v. 31; cf. Matthew 5:18; Luke 16:17).

Though it is impossible to be absolutely certain, it appears that verses 32-37 reflect Mark's observations on Jesus' instructions to his disciples. In short, Mark offers a brief exhortation to his own community based on Jesus' instructions. Consequently, in order to empower the disciples of Mark's community to remain faithful irrespective of their circumstances, he echoes Jesus' teaching by repeatedly emphasizing the need for disciples to be alert, awake or on watch.

Mark reminds his readers that even though the certainty of "these things" was initially set out by Jesus, the exact time frame is not. He writes, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (v. 32). Mark's point here is not a new revelation. On the contrary, it simply reflects what Jesus had already said, "Pray that it may not be in winter." Inexplicably,

Jesus does not know the season when these things will occur.

That being the case, Mark thus exhorts his readers to: "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come" (v. 33). "The time" is any time when a disciple faces a test or trial, be it messianic imposters, wars, earthquakes, famines, persecution, the profaning of the temple or even "the Son of Man coming in clouds."

Mark illustrates his point with a brief parable rather than the fig metaphor. "It is like a man going on a journey ..." who gives directives to his slaves and orders the doorkeeper to watch. Why? Simply put, the master will return at a time that "you do not know" (v. 35). "Therefore, keep awake ... or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly" (vv. 35a, 36). In plain language, if a disciple falls asleep, then he or she has not endured to the end and thus will not be saved or gathered along with the elect (cf. 13:13, 27). Finally, and to leave no doubt regarding Jesus' point as well as his own, Mark wants his readers to understand (cf. 14), accept and adopt the following maxim, "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake" (v. 37).

Additional Resources

- ["The Text this Week"](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).