

*Isaiah 64: 1-9*

*Mark 13: 24-37*

I hate to admit this, but one of my first female role models was Miss Ellie on Dallas. Don't judge me. I came of age in the 80s, raised by a single mom who worked all day, who lived for her evening soap operas, and loved sharing her favorite storylines with me. My sister and I took bets on who shot J.R. President Reagan's first wife Jane Wyman was the fierce and beautiful wine matriarch on Falcon Crest and I never understood how Ronnie could ever have left her. And Joan Collins on Dynasty was just delicious. Now — you who love The Crown, and who have never missed an episode of Downton Abbey — you can't judge me. Captivating television drama had to start somewhere.

My mom's evening escape from her daily life as a middle school guidance counselor into the world of the rich and famous was a kind of spiritual practice. Until — Dallas, season 9, the dream sequence. That broke her. At the end of season 8, Bobby, the good Ewing son, was murdered by his crazy half-sister-in-law, leaving his true soulmate Pam and every middle-aged woman in America shattered. Over 31 episodes of season 9, the Ewing's adjusted to a new normal without Bobby and returned to their scheming ways. But in the first minute of season 10 — Pam awakens one morning to find Bobby very much alive — and in her shower. In order to bring back Patrick Duffy's beloved character — lo and behold — Dallas writers made the entire season 9 into Pam's dream. A whole season didn't happen. Mom was incredulous. How the writers went to such lengths to resurrect Bobby Ewing — wasting an entire season — asking her to suspend reason and belief — as if all that had happened in the first 8 seasons was so believable. No, this story line was a bridge too far, even for her. It wasn't realistic. Nobody liked this concept of a dream sequence.

Well, friends, it is not 1986 anymore. Ten months into 2020 and 250,000 souls gone too soon, many of us hope that this season in the history of planet earth might turn out to be a dream sequence — from which the whole world will soon awaken. For those who have lost family members, jobs, their health, or their savings to this pandemic, for those who have suffered from catastrophic loss related to climate crises, for those grieving and protesting senseless deaths, revealing our racial reckoning — finding these last hard months to be fiction is a great fantasy. But this is no dream sequence, this is painful reality.

And it is just here, just now — that we are plopped into the liturgical season of Advent. Perfect timing. Since we're not going anywhere, it's a particularly good time to pursue what these four weeks of Advent crave — introspection and reflection. In a season when most people get caught up in the outward trimmings of lights

and tinsel, pretty wrapping paper, and eco-friendly roping — people of faith set out to get spiffed up on the inside, remodeling our hearts so they are updated and ready to fully welcome this year's newborn with an invitation to stay that won't be refused. When we do it well, we free Christ from the cobweb-covered crèche set in the bowels of the basement. When we welcome right, we do it with the enthusiastic expectation that this can be the year — finally — when he comes to us and settles in to stay. Advent's incarnation should be the gift that keeps on giving, offering us a God who isn't retired, or retiring, claiming a Christ who never stops breaking in, bringing to life a baby who wants to claim room in our heart's inn every day, in every season.

Our four-week pursuit of a more meaningful relationship with this Jesus also includes getting ready for his second coming — and the promised arrival of God's ultimate kingdom on earth. Jesus tells us to stay awake for the Second Advent. It should be easier than ever this year. I'm not sleeping well, are you?

Truthfully, Presbyterians find it easy to ignore the Second Advent with its darkened sun and light-less moon. It's neither decent nor in order. Not like the first story of God birthed into human form by a teenage girl against a backdrop of persecution and political turmoil. That's a magical and mystical story that we can reenact with our children. Omitting the slaughter of the innocents from the pageant, we know how the other scary parts finally resolve. What God made happen in the past has changed the world forever. In Christ's beginning is his end, and in his death is our new life. So maybe this cryptic future can wait.

And yet, this Second Advent surely deserves more than a shoulder shrug. For the idea that Christ will come again calls us beyond reliving the past to dreaming of our future, envisioning that time, someday, when we are not captive to bodies and minds that decay, when all are free and all are fed, when there is no estrangement, when suffering of all measure is a thing of the past. A place of no more judgment, no more striving, no more hate. And we are told — by Jesus himself, to look for the signs that it is beginning. His lovely fig tree metaphor is tame and tender and touching. But it is his first words in Mark's 13th chapter that have trained us and taught us that the signs we will see will be unsettling. The kind of events that we think about as we reflect on the year that we are enduring right now.

We are unsettled, to say the least. This pandemic, and the arrival of a deadly, highly transmutable disease, has thrust our nation and much of the world into a new economic and social order, marred by severe health care inequalities and crippling class divisions. Our planet is a pressure cooker with wildfires ravaging Australia and killing countless animals. We see disastrous deforestation in the Amazon, a hurricane season is so severe we've gone to naming storms with the Greek alphabet for only the second time in history, murder hornets are in Washington state and billions of locusts in Africa. White supremacy is given cover and encouragement from people elected to lead this city set on a hill. Our democracy is under assault, led by.... Rudy. Across the globe, a tornado of grief and fear and fury shreds our sense of security. We're no longer in good trouble — we're in big trouble. And then Chadwick Boseman died! — the man who played real-life justice warriors Jackie Robinson and Thurgood Marshall, and the fictional warrior the Black Panther, and the Godfather of soul, James Brown. To top it off, an earthquake in Utah shook the Salt Lake Temple to the top of its iconic spire, causing the golden trumpet to fall from the angel Moroni's right hand. Apocalyptic theologians are losing their minds!

Through history and across religions, people in severe crisis have often questioned whether what they are enduring is an ushering in of the last days. Where there is social and political upheaval, when we are processing a slew of unprecedented or shocking events, we inevitably dust off Apocalyptic Theology. Surely all of this chaos must be leading somewhere, revealing something that is about to occur. That's what apocalyptic means — the Greek word *apocalypses* — is an unveiling, a revelation. What are these days revealing? Our inability to create whole communities that value science as a gift of faith, not something at odds with it. Our difficulty being sacrificial when the way we want life to be is disrupted. Our willingness to accept division over unity. Our temptation to embrace wild conspiracy theories and alternative facts. Our fragile democracy. Yes, much that is hopeful has been revealed, too, of course — strength and resiliency in the face of what is wrong, ways to be church even when we are isolated, a summoning of new courage and passion in young people, dedication and service beyond self from healthcare workers worldwide, and an urgency to change our trajectory before we reach the point of no return. But overall, our apocalyptic moment has shown us most clearly our fault lines. Our faults. Apocalypse or not, God is revealing something to us — and what we view, we must take and transform and turn into new life. God is not looking for an eschatological eye roll here — but love-infused action.

In the Gospel passage for today from Mark, what we call Jesus' "Little Apocalypse," we are jarred by words that really fit nowhere in Mark. Strange and compelling, this is not how the Jesus of Mark spoke or acted until these few sentences — odd at best. With prophetic symbolic action, Jesus stands in front of the temple in Jerusalem and predicts its destruction, and with it, the end of the order it represents. The significance of the temple's destruction, given their whole history — is nothing less than the end of the world as they knew it. We know that Jesus' words and language are not to be taken literally. This is symbolism, much of it tied to their history as told in the book of Daniel. The fullness of God will be here someday, so — look up, keep awake, join up, join in. Imagine what God has in store next. There's no going back to normal. We endure this present by holding onto hope for what is on the other side of it — God's dreams for something so much better. Something real, and realized. That was the message to them and it is the same to us.

You know me well. I am ultimately much more practical than mystical, drawn to words rather than symbols, living out my faith in the nitty gritty of real life rather than gazing at coming clouds. I confess, though, that I struggle with an attraction to the apocalypse. I'm surprisingly compelled by words about Christ's Second Coming — because ultimately, I embrace it, however and whenever it occurs or is occurring. Because that is a future entrusted to God. It is faithful to have hope, to believe in a time defined by reconciliation and restoration. I pray that you and I get to be a part of it, that wholeness, that shalom. All this brokenness, beautiful though it is, all this incredible diversity — defaced and deformed by our disparity — will be a thing of the past.

God has still has dreams for us. We must never stop looking for the light show of hope, peace, joy, and love. That is how we welcome the second Advent, the last days. We are not to fear it or ignore it, but to expect it. Be spiritually awake to the signs, keep watch, and be ready. Not the scary signs, but the tender and touching ones — the signs of love’s in-breaking, hope’s re-surg-ing, wisdom’s returning. To see what is being revealed and respond to it. It does not come simply to give us light in the darkness. It comes to break us open to change.

I think it’s safe to say we are not about to see Jesus in the clouds, the stars falling from heaven, a sun and moon that give no light. You don’t need to go home and fish out your crash helmets and stock up on cans of baked beans. The world has been here before. Crisis and cataclysm. But in the upheaval of the world’s past, God’s people read the signs. Revelations offered gifts to which they responded. They interpreted their dreams to help guide their course. What they did with what they learned changed enabled the world to go on — to be a better reflection of our creator, a more faithful partner with the One God still working Her way in this world. Will we do the same?

Your First Pres staff chose the Advent Theme “Those Who Dream” to guide our purpose-filled weeks of preparation. Our clergy colleagues at Sanctified Art spent months imagining what God is calling us as a church to think about in this particularly apocalyptic-ish time. More than trying to make sense of the signs, one way to sense God’s intentions, what the Lord is up to, is to pay attention to our dreams. Our night dreams, and our day dreams. To be spiritually awake and alert for what God is telling us in our moments of rest and in our moments of wonder. The theologian Dr. Marcia Riggs says, “We keep awake by dreaming, by envisioning how we will live out God’s promise to be with us. We expect God to be with us and meet us on the other side of this.”

Friends, 2020 is no dream sequence but a time in our lives pregnant with potential. In this disorienting wilderness in which we find ourselves, God is calling us to make straight paths to justice and smooth out the rough places of our broken unity and get a fast highway back to civility and compassion. But how? We put our trust in the one who is in intimate relationship with us — our potter. And... we stay spiritually alert to what is happening around us, ready to do our part in God’s plan. Just as it has been for all those dreamers like Isaiah, Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, Simeon, the shepherds and the Magi—those dreaming dreamers were given and responded to God’s dreams for the world through them. Like them, God’s dreams are going to come to life through your imagination, your hard work, your attentiveness, your courage. Yours and mine. God is still speaking. What signs are you giving God that you are listening?

**The Reverend Melissa Anne Rogers, Associate Pastor**