Sunday, December 6th, 2026 – First Sunday of Advent – Year B
Written by: *Pastor Karen Stepko, Christ Lutheran Church – Rhein, Saskatchewan*
Written on: *Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, Mark 13:24-37*

This year, the psalm chosen for the first Sunday of Advent – Psalm 80 – is a prayer for the restoration of Israel at the conclusion of the Babylonian exile, with the repeated refrain:

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Once Jerusalem and Judah were conquered, the Israelites believed that God had abandoned them. Everything which the Babylonians did not steal, they destroyed. Only the weakest and the poorest Israelites were allowed to stay behind to work the land on behalf of the Babylonians. Everyone else was tortured, killed, or taken prisoner and forced into exile. Yet again, the Hebrew people found themselves living in a foreign land – as slaves.

However, after seventy long years of waiting, the Babylonians were conquered by Persian king, Cyrus the Great. In the first year of his reign, Cyrus granted the exiled Jews freedom from captivity. At long last, they could return to the land which God had promised to them and re-build the temple in Jerusalem – but what awaited them in Israel was no dream.

Instead of their former life, which they had hoped and prayed for decades to return to, the Jewish people were confronted with numerous harsh realities.

Their rich farmland had been destroyed by famine. Their cities and their Temple had been pillaged and still lay in ruins. The caretakers left behind had continued to neglect the worship of God and to disregard the commandments, just as citizens prior to the exile had done.

Amid so much suffering and so many years of silence, the Jewish people felt as though God had turned away from them – perhaps forever.

For the prophet Isaiah, this situation was heartbreaking. It prompted him to give voice to one of the most urgent and desperate cries in the Old Testament:

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!"

Isaiah begs God to do something – anything! – to set the balance of the universe right. Out of his frustration and disappointment comes a demand for a dramatic sign of God's power – the sky being torn apart, the mountains to ripple with earthquakes like bubbles rising to the top of a boiling pot of water – SOMETHING which all witnesses will have no choice but to acknowledge and respect.

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

The poem "Christmas Bells" – which was eventually set to music and became the hymn "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" – was written in 1863 by American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Two years earlier, Longfellow's wife Fanny had died when her dress caught on fire. Longfellow's face, arms and hands had also been badly burned as he tried to put out the flames: first with a throw rug and then with his own body.

Without his beloved wife, the Christmases of 1861 and 1862 were not happy ones for Henry Longfellow. He documented in his journal "how inexpressibly sad are all holidays" and "a merry Christmas say the children, but that is no more for me".

It was at this time in American history that the Civil War was being fought.

Longfellow's eldest son, Charley, ran away to join the Union Army, against the wishes of his father. In November of 1963, Longfellow received news that Charley had been severely wounded in the Battle of New Hope Church in Virginia during the Mine Run Campaign.

Still grieving for his wife and unsure what would become of his son, Longfellow poured out his feelings through a poem. He expressed how discouraged he felt, not only by the events of his own life, but also by the war currently raging between the northern and southern United States.

And in despair, I bowed my head
There is no peace on Earth, I said
For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on Earth, good will to men

In his own words, Longfellow was pleading with God to "tear open the heavens and come down".

However, Longfellow concluded his poem on a note of hope, professing his belief that, one day, Christ would come again in glory to set all things right.

Then peeled the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men!"

God did ultimately heed Isaiah's desperate call to "tear open the heavens and come down" – not through a dramatic display filled with power and might, but in the humble form of an insignificant and helpless peasant baby.

During Advent, we are called to prepare ourselves not just for a date on the calendar – December 25th – but for a person – Jesus Christ.

When we hear Mark's charge to, *"Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come!"* it's difficult not to feel anxious – but Mark is urging us to take note of the slow and steady work of God which continues to unfold before our eyes.

As Christians, all of our hope is rooted in Christ's coming: not only did God dwell among us, living and dying as one of us, not only is God on the way, bringing a promise of renewal for this suffering and weary world, but God dwells amongst us now, often in ways and places where we do not expect God to be found.

When we acknowledge and strive to meet the needs of those around us, we are met by the God who comes to us in Christ – and until God comes again, our call as Christians is not to wait passively, but to carry on the work of God in this world in anticipation of what is to come.

Right now, our world is crying out for a saviour – and the God who returned Israel from exile and raised Christ from the dead hears our voice as we call.

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. **AMEN**