



Awake in Hope

Isaiah 64:1-9; Ps 80:1-7, 17-19; Mark 13:24-37; 1 Cor 1:3-9

What would we do with God in our midst? What do we do with God? Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. It is a time to anticipate God's coming into our lives. We look back on Jesus' birth, but we also look forward to Jesus' return in glory and for each one of us. Perhaps our Christmas reflections actually distract us from the meaning of Advent and God's coming among us. We think of a newborn baby, forgetting that it is Almighty God who is come. If we look beyond our idyllic manger scene, how would we respond to God's fullness come into our lives? Would we live in awakened hope?

There were terror attacks in Mumbai, India this week, as some struggled against an establishment in conflict with their own aims. People were killed, families ripped apart, and millions set on edge. Is there hope amid this kind of chaos? It has been raining for weeks in southern Brazil. It missed the news here, but slow, steady rains over the course of weeks drenched Santa Catarina. Rivers rose, while the forested slopes were so water-logged they slid from their foundations. They drug homes and vegetation with them—something akin to the flood of '69 here in Lowesville. Rich and poor alike were caught unprepared for the onslaught of something so necessary and simple as a slow, steady rain. Where is hope amid this kind of chaos? Are we prepared for hope, even the hope we claim as our own?

Hope does not mean much when we are comfortable, satisfied, safe, warm, and fed. In fact, we are often likely to feel there is no need for hope. Hope was, after all, made for times of disaster and difficulty. When we are too comfortable, we are more likely to fall to sleep than to hope. Comfort dulls our senses. It may push us to ignore the warning signs that the soil of our lives has become too water-logged to hold on any longer to the mountain slopes of life.

Isaiah longed for God's presence to shake up a faithless nation. Israel was too far asleep and living as though ignorant of their responsibility before *Yahweh*. They did not want to wrestle with the issues of how being God's people might interfere with their plans, dreams, and ambitions. They wanted God under control—their control. They wanted a sleepy existence with no need for hope, with no room for the need to take stock of God's will as separate from their own comfort and prosperity. Isaiah wanted them refashioned after God's interests. They were more concerned with their own interests.

Paul commented to the Corinthians that they did not lack anything that really mattered. They had all the spiritual gifting necessary. They were simply missing recognition of the kind of call placed on their lives. There were to be united together into fellowship through and with Jesus Christ. It was God Almighty who had called them to this higher purpose. It was time to awaken from their self-centered ways and factions to understand the life of hope to which God had summoned them.

We lull ourselves with visions of comfort. We shelter ourselves with a twisted perspective on God that flows in accordance with our will, rather than the reality of God's identity. Too long, perhaps, we have sung the old hymn, "Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling." We delude ourselves to see Jesus as too tender to make demands on our lives and place responsibility at our feet. We sing "Away in a Manger," forgetting the manger held much more than a baby whose will we can manipulate or redirect. We sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," ignoring that God is no sleepy little town to be toyed with, coddled, or laid to rest so that we might go about the business of our lives. It is high time to awaken, to anticipate, to begin living according to a real hope.

It is the same Jesus of Bethlehem's manger who spoke to the crowds regarding an impending day of disaster, tribulation, and the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus forecasted events leading up to that day in A.D. 70, when Titus marched into Jerusalem, sacrificed a pig on the altar to *Yahweh*, and laid siege to the city as the Jews torched the Temple. It was a time of anxiety, worry, fighting, violence, and destruction. It was the culmination of years of Jewish revolt against Rome. It marked the end of the Temple Judaism of Jesus' day. It was a time when people needed hope.

Oh, they had hope of a sort. They had a hope set on the coming of a political, military leader who would overthrow Rome. It was this hope that led to Jerusalem's destruction. It was not a hope placed in God on God's own terms. It was a hope which predicted God's coming to rescue a people after their own aims of self-realization, self-determination, and the political dominance of others. It was the false hope of a people who had deluded themselves into believing that their dreams, ambitions, and desires were shared by God. They had convinced themselves that God would do things their way. They were too comfortable with their projections of reality to understand God's words through Jesus and the prophets like Isaiah.

God offered hope, but hope of a different kind. It was not a hope limited by the winds of independence, politics, and the forces of economics and self-determination. Rather, it was a hope that God is above such petty issues that set the dreams and ambitions of one group over those of another. It is to this hope we are to awaken. It is to this understanding of God we are called to bow our lives, dreams, and ambitions in service.

Israel had its hopes set on a misguided understanding of God's will and purpose. It still does. We are not so different, though, are we? As a nation, we are still people seeking our own advancement, regardless of what it might cost others. We desire to live as though our interests, advancement, and self-determination were more important than the same advancement for the rest of the world. Our hope is set on our own comfort and privilege, our limited perspective of life on this side of eternity. We assume that the difference between living on earth and spending eternity in God's presence is merely a question of geography. We ignore God's interest in transforming the character of our living and beyond the self-centered ambitions of our lives.

That is where hope, real hope, comes in. Hope is where we begin to live with the confidence and awareness of God's presence and provision. It is where circumstances begin to matter much less than how we might serve God's interests ahead of our own. Jesus couched this hope in the story of a landowner who left his belongings in the care of his servants. They were charged to faithful stewardship in recognition of the master's will. They were entrusted with a choice. They could carry on with the master's will or abuse their station, seeking after their own dreams, ambitions, and desires.

Jesus charged the disciples ahead of the uncertainty of the times to come to live their hope in confidence. They were to live in awareness of God's will and purposes. They were not to allow comfort to lull their awareness of God's true identity, character, and purpose.

What will we do with our message of hope? We have the choice to present ourselves as responsible citizens of the Reign of Christ, or to live after our own dreams, ambitions, and desires. When the master returns for us, will our hope have prepared us for a life of eternity with God?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*