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Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
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Mark 13:24–37  
Isaiah 64:1–9

## GRACE PRODUCES ANTICIPATION

The dynamics of peoples' lives are amazingly similar, aren't they? Yesterday I was driving on the interstate. I had just picked up our Christmas tree from a friend. It was strapped to the back of the truck, and I was heading home, and every time a car passed, there was the same response. There were the guys that were driving – urrrr – you have seen that, right? And then there were the passengers. And when they would come alongside and see the Christmas tree, they inevitably smiled. One lady even went, "See, I told you—pine!"

Our circumstances are more alike than we often want to recognize. And as we begin our Advent journey, Jesus is preparing us for his second coming just as he prepared his disciples for his departure after his death and the promise of his return. This Mark passage has been named the *Little Apocalypse*. What a subtle title describing such a live-changing upheaval—God's grace producing a dynamic shift in our lives. Indeed, a turning point in history.

When we anticipate the first advent of Christ, the incarnation of God, we anticipate Christ's return as well. Or do we? We rarely talk about the second coming in Presbyterian churches. Do we really believe that after all this time the Day of the Lord will arrive, that God will indeed rend the heavens and come down? Trembling mountain, boiling water, all that may be the stuff of Isaiah, but aren't we just a little too far removed? All this waiting for God, and there has been no return. False predictions—twice they scared us this year, or tried to. And now they are publishing predictions from the Mayans, of all people, that the day of Christ's return will be in December of 2012. But did you hear Jesus say, "No one knows; only the Father"? I think it's easier, maybe too easy, for Christians today to stop believing in the second coming. After all, we have to get on with our lives. But when grace produces within us an anticipation of Christ's return, it can enhance our holiday plans.

I love Christmas pageants. I love candlelight services and carol sings and holiday celebrations. I love model trains. Okay? But Isaiah and Mark are telling us there is so much more. *O that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you, as when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil.* What does that lamentation mean? What is Isaiah saying? Come, Lord, fix this broken world. Come, Lord, rebuild your temple within me. Come where I find unwelcome, even hostile relatives. Come, come back to your home—to Jerusalem. Rebuild your capital and start with me. I'm tired of feeling alienated from God and from those around me. Come.

I don't know what has caused the inevitable holiday sadness for you. For some, it has been an untimely death, a grief that has separated us from our faith. For others it's an unrelenting illness, pain, a struggle that drains us in our spirit. We become so spirit-sick that our bodies react. We feel attacked on all sides. And whatever crisis we are facing, whatever abandonment we may feel, Isaiah and Mark promise us that God still pursues us to the ends of the earth and the ends of the heavens. A loving parent—like a master potter working in clay—God works through even our rebellion. God's angels come and understand as only a loving parent could have told them. God deals with us the way a wise parent deals with a frustrated child.

We pretend we don't know anything about Christ's second coming. But I think we understand more than we admit. In the same way that Christ's first coming forever changed us, his return can also change our understanding of God's plan for the entire world, not just for us—God's kingdom, where money and medicine, resources and hope, no longer need to be hoarded. We know what Jesus is saying when he talks about his second coming. We have just failed to recognize it. But it's right there in Mark. The dynamics are so similar. How could we have missed it? In his first coming as our Savior, Jesus says, "We do not know whether the master will come in the evening or at midnight." When did he have the last supper with the disciples? In the evening. When did he go into the garden and ask them to pray with him? It was the middle of the night. When did he say to Peter, "You will deny me before the cock crows?" And at the dawn, what happened? He was turned over to Pilate. Mark tells us exactly what Jesus' second coming is like. It's like the events that led to his crucifixion—amazingly similar dynamics.

This day—the beginning of the anticipation of the incarnation of our Savior— means so much to us that we are asked to wake up, to watch. For you see, the moment Christ was nailed to that cross and the earth shook and the moon was darkened, that's precisely the moment that his return became imminent. So when our lives are filled with his grace, we have no choice. All we can do is live in expectation for a time when creation is restored by the goodness of one who came and lived among us. So let us love and work together. Let us be reconciled to those who are in need in our midst. Let us be faithful to the task that we have been given. Christ has come. Christ is coming. And Christ is coming again. Hallelujah! Amen.