

Isaiah 64:1-9 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever.

Mark 13:24-37

"But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Sermon: We Didn't Light the Fire

In 1989 Billy Joel had a hit song that was a recitation of the major historical highlights of his then forty years on earth - starting with 1949

Harry Truman, Doris Day

Red China, Johnny Ray

South Pacific, Walter Winchell, Joe DiMaggio

And after every four years of names and events, he sang a chorus:

We didn't start the fire

It was always burning since the world's been turning

We didn't start the fire

No, we didn't light it

But we tried to fight it

I always enjoyed that song, and especially the music video which took us rapidly through images of the people and events covering that time span. I read that Joel wrote it because he overheard a young person say he felt sorry for old folks - like then forty year old Billy Joel - because nothing happened in their lifetime.

Buy the reason for the song really doesn't matter; the recitation of history is as old as history itself. Billy Joel took his place in a long line of storytellers who remind us that we are not entirely our own invention - others

have gone before, others have paved the way, others have sowed the seeds that grow now in the garden of our lives.

Recitation of history is a traditional element of Advent. During the four weeks before Christmas the church remembers the key characters and events that led up to the starry night when the Christ child was born. We remember for three reasons:

The first is, God commands us to remember. In the book of Deuteronomy God speaks to the people of Israel and says:

Deuteronomy 8:12-18 When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

We remember because God commands us to remember. Secondly, we remember to remain humble. Do not exalt yourself, do not say to yourself, "my power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." When we remember the history of our ancestors - both in the flesh and in the faith - we find quite a cast of characters, none of which are without their flaws and failings. Sometimes it's worse than failings, sometimes it's betrayal, cruelty, sin and evil. Remembering gives us reason to be humble; remembering gives us reason to repent.

One, We remember because God commands it, two, we remember to remain humble, and three, we remember to remain hopeful - remember the Lord your God, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. Even with all their flaws and failings in full display, those who came before us in the faith never lost hope - and they never lost hope because their hope was based not on their own goodness, but on the faithfulness of God.

In an early letter to the church the Apostle Paul engages in a bit of Billy Joel style recitation of history. It's a very famous passage with the emphasis on faith and hope:

Hebrews 11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. By faith Sarah received power of procreation, even though she was too old. By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites. By faith Moses refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets.

Maybe Paul would have had time to tell all those stories if he'd wrote a song like Billy Joel. I wondered if anyone had set the Bible story to Billy Joel's tune, but I couldn't find any example, so I tried it myself:

Adam, Eve, Snake and tree
Banished for eternity
Cain and Able fratricide

Abraham and many wives

That's as far as I got - I never got to Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, not to mention Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Maybe that's why we need four weeks to remember our story, not four minutes. But, remember we must, for God commands it, it keeps us humble, and remembering gives us a reason to have hope, reason to rejoice.

In our remembering let us start at the very beginning, the very first day of creation,

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

Our theme for Advent is light, and during this first week of Advent let us begin each day with by remembering that the light which surrounds us is the light of God - God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

Each household here this morning has received, I hope, a prayer card for your breakfast table. When you fold it in half it gives both a bible verse and a short prayer - a prayer I hope you will remember and use frequently throughout the week. I hope you find that it connects you to the season and leads to a deeper communion with the God we await in the baby whose birth is now drawing near.