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!

The words from the prophet Isaiah reveal desperate longing for the physical presence of God. As we enter the advent season, we are preparing to celebrate the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. Of course, Jesus did not come in a way that made the nations tremble. Instead, he came as a helpless newborn. If we really pay attention to the story of the Nativity, we can see that the birth of Christ was not nearly as idyllic as we tend to portray it. For example, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth mostly because she feared for her life when her pregnancy became obvious. In addition, the “innkeeper” who turned the holy couple away was most likely a relative of Joseph’s who refused them lodging except with the livestock. The account in Matthew tells us that the visit of the Wise Men resulted not only in the holy family needing to flee to Egypt, but also in the slaughter of all of the children ages two and under in and around Bethlehem. The story of Jesus begins as it ends: with rejection, hate, and murder. It may not be pleasant to think about the Nativity in this way, but it is important to remember that the life of Jesus was more than just the arrival of a harmless man who would teach us how to be nice to one another.

Remembering the controversy of the birth of Christ also puts us in the correct frame of mind to imaging Christ’s return. When we think about Christ in the world today in the form of the Holy Spirit, we generally view him as a benevolent presence, and rightfully so. We know the words of John 3:16, but what verses 17 and 18 complete the story: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

The apocalyptic vision that begins our gospel reading describes the Son of Man emerging from clouds and darkness to “gather his elect from the ends of earth to the ends of heaven.” The problem is that we don’t know when it is going to happen. This gives us two options, each deeply flawed. The first option is to procrastinate, to live our lives as if Christ’s return is so far off as to be irrelevant. The other is to live in a state of constant readiness, obsessing over every minute so that we don’t get caught unawares. Not only would this be extremely stressful, but it would also seem likely to result in a sort of exhausted disappointment when each day ended with no news… the kind of disappointment that results in thoughts like those expressed by Isaiah: “But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.”

We know that it will be our faith, not our actions that keep us awake. In fact, Isaiah compares our righteous deeds to a filthy cloth. Paul assures us that “you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” We are asleep when we mistake God’s patience for approval. We are asleep when we view the birth and life of Jesus as a kind of fairy tale that won’t culminate in the promised return and judgement. We are asleep when we put our worldly idols ahead of God. Advent is a time of waiting, but this waiting includes preparation and awareness. AMEN