

First Sunday of Advent
Cycle B, December 3, 2017
Church of St. Joan of Arc, Marlton NJ
[Mark 13:33-37; Isaiah 63:16-17, 19;
64:2-7; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9]

Save Us, O God!

Yesterday we buried Robert Cunningham. His wife and two sons sat here in these front pews. His third son, Paul, was not here because three months ago we buried Paul. In three months Marie lost a son and her husband. Can you imagine? If anyone has a reason to lose hope, to be angry, to feel abandoned by God ... Marie does.

Yet she was here. See? She came here. Even if she is wondering where God is, she came *here*.

The Cunningham family are all avid bowlers. Not much of a bowler myself, I still wanted to say something they could relate to. I remembered Bishop Reiss was a bowler. Bishop Reiss was the bishop of Trenton through the 80's and half of the 90's. He was called the Bowling Bishop. In an article about him in Reader's Digest, he was quoted as saying he loved the

bowler's prayer: "Spare us, O Lord!"

I told the Cunninghams that story. They smiled, they laughed.

"Spare us, O Lord." A spare in bowling is really a save, isn't it? You roll the ball, you hit seven pins. Three still stand. You get a second chance and this time knock the three remaining. That's a save.

"Spare us, O Lord." It really means, "Save us, O Lord." Save us. Help us. Rescue us.

We can't do it on our own.

This is the prayer I hear when I hear Isaiah Chapter 63, today's beautiful and powerful first reading.

The Israelites have been devastated. They have lost everything. Homeland. Security. Family. The temple. God.

They cry out: "O that you would rend the heavens and come down!" Can you hear the agony, the desperation? It's a cry for help. "Spare us!"

Have you ever felt that way?

Ancient Israel felt they had lost God, that God had given up on them. "Why do you let us wander from your ways, O God!" the prophet says.

A long time ago I when I was in college, during my "experimental years," I went to different churches to see how they worshipped. I went to an Episcopal Church. Unknownst to me, there was a very famous guest speaker preaching that day. To this day I remember the opening line of his sermon: "God has abandoned the Episcopal Church." O, my! Heads shot up so fast that several of the ladies lost their wigs!

That's what Israel was feeling.

We feel it too when we are broken-hearted. When we sin. When we abandon our values. When we hurt ourselves and others. When we lose hope.

Save us, O Lord! Come down and save us ... from ourselves! Save us from our own stupidity and stubbornness, thinking we can do this

without You, that we don't need Your help!

Save us from our fear! I see so many people afraid ... fearing for their safety, the safety of their children. So many people are afraid to love, to trust, to forgive.

Save us from our blindness! We sleepwalk through the day! We miss so much, waste so much time, take so much for granted!

Save us from our hurried pace! We have forgotten how to wait. We have forgotten what waiting will teach us.

Save us, O Lord! Do not abandon us! Open the heavens and come down!

But who abandons who? Maybe that is Advent's question! Who remains faithful?

There will be a woman, a young woman, who will, with one word, bring hope into the world. "Fiat," she says. "Yes. Let it be done." A simple woman. A simple name. Mary. She will give us the face of a faithful God.