



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, NOVEMBER 29, 2020
ISAIAH 64:1-9; PSALM 80:1-7, 16-18; MARK 13:24-37

KEEP AWAKE!

Mark 13:24-37 [*Jesus said, “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.”]

“Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”

Because the Episcopal Church follows a set three-year lectionary, we know well in advance what to expect from our scripture readings on the first Sunday of Advent. But still, every year, Jesus’ foreboding words are a shock, a splash of very cold water.

“In those days . . . the sun will be darkened . . . and the stars will fall from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming with great power and glory [to gather his elect]. But you do not know when, so I say to all of you: Keep awake.”

This is how we begin a new church year and prepare for the Word to become flesh and live among us. We do it by considering ultimate things, what some might call “end times.” Have you ever wondered about that? We begin our anticipation of the certain joy of the Christ child by plunging ourselves into the language and imagery of uncertain, apocalyptic times.

This gospel passage is part of a what is called “the little apocalypse” in Mark’s gospel, and it shares themes with other apocalyptic books in the Bible – like Daniel and Revelation. The word “apocalypse” literally means “revelation, an uncovering,” and it reveals both what is wrong in the current world and God’s imminent action to set things right.

This past June, the 20s/30s group hosted a scripture study on the Book of Revelation. Someone in the group commented that reading an apocalypse in the middle of a pandemic felt right. Aren’t we living in an apocalypse now? The cruelties of inadequate healthcare and racism are unveiled day after day. With no clear sense of how to fix things, there is a tangible longing for divine action.

In the scripture study, we also talked about how popular culture has so literally and vividly misinterpreted apocalyptic stories (think The Rapture or the Left Behind series) that in today’s gospel, when Jesus says, “Wake up! The Son of Man is Coming!,” we can hear a wake-up call to end times, judgment and punishment.

But that’s not what’s going on.

Ancient apocalyptic stories were not intended to scare sleepy people into religious devotion. They were meant to offer hope to faithful yet vulnerable communities in crisis – people with hard lives, trapped under the thumb of oppressive and violent power. This hope acknowledged the hard circumstances and the likelihood they could get worse. And it reminded them, that no matter what, God’s power and desire for peace and justice would prevail.

Today’s gospel was written for a 1st century Christian community reeling under political persecution and the destruction of Jerusalem. For them, prophecies of cosmic chaos with the sun growing dark and stars veering off course – well, that was good news because it promised the end of a world of suffering and injustice, and the inbreaking of

a world governed by the power and wisdom of God.

Jesus gives his disciples this wake-up call just before he takes up his journey toward Jerusalem and the cross. And we recall it for ourselves every year on the first Sunday of Advent. “The Son of Man, the Messiah, the One who wipes every tear and makes all things new is coming. Keep awake!”

It was a wake-up call to early Christians and it is our wake-up call, too – a summons to attentive waiting. Not only for the ending of some things but for the beginning of everything. The fulfillment of HOPE – both at Christmas and in the ultimate coming of Christ. Already and not yet.

The four weeks of Advent are traditionally focused on preparation and expectation. Usually, and by that I mean any other Advent, we would clear space for quiet reflection, for staying grounded in our God-given identity amid the buzzing energy of social events and gift-giving and travel. We would commit ourselves and encourage each other to prioritizing spiritual nurture amidst the distractions of the holiday season.

This year, though, those choices are largely out of our control. For some, there is already more solitude than a spirit can possibly need. The attentive waiting for a new beginning has been going on since March and we still don’t know when the time will come.

For others, reliable space and time for quiet reflection has been largely surrendered to the demands of teaching or parenting or care-giving or other essential services. Some may have dimmed the light on their own needs in order to spotlight the well-being of others.

And all of us arrive at the threshold of Advent carrying heavy things – grief over so many lives lost to COVID and the divisions among us, heartache from deaths close to us and continued separation from family and friends.

What does preparation and holy waiting look like in the midst of all this?

First, I think it means remembering that we do not journey through Advent as individuals. We do it as a community. All our spiritual roots are intertwined and fed by the same source. So, if yours are parched,

trust that the prayers and love of others will sustain you. Lean on the offerings of the season – O Antiphons, prayer in the nave, Christmas Eve services – to remind you that you are beloved and claimed as Christ’s own.

Second, holy waiting might mean letting go of needing this year to look like Advents and Christmases past. There is no recreating the past and there will surely be many traditions and loved ones that we will miss. And we must turn fully toward the future. If we can remain open and thankful for all that is possible, we might discover that some habits are worth discarding for new traditions to emerge.

And finally, keep alert. Watch for the signs of God’s presence. Sometimes we only know the wind is blowing because we see the trees swaying. So, look for signs the Holy Spirit is on the move, strengthening, healing, and reconciling creation. The signs are there.

The willingness of so many – including children – to embrace discomfort to keep others safe. The patience and compassion of care givers who are working harder than we can imagine. The strength and resilience of leaders of racial justice who never give up and who call us to our better selves. The beauty of the winter landscape. Look for the signs!

In this way, we bear witness to all the ways God’s presence and power are manifest in this world right now, even in a pandemic. So, live the good news that the Holy One is in our midst and is born again at Christmas. Lean into the work of the Spirit, lending your weight to the tilting of the axis toward healing and reconciliation.

Keep awake to hope! The Son of Man is coming. Amen.



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EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL