

Mark 13:24-37

“But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
25 and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.
26 Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. 27
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.

Mark 13:28 “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. 29 So also, when you see these
things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30 Truly I tell you, this
generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31 Heaven and
earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Mark 13:32 “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor
the Son, but only the Father. 33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time
will come. 34 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.
35 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, 36 or else he may find you
asleep when he comes suddenly. 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

ADVENT

Here comes Black Friday even earlier than usual. Bell ringers are out in force.
Advertisers are busy selling their shopping as therapy gospel.

And what are we Christians doing? We’re talking about the end of the world, as you
know it. The sun is dark, and the stars are falling from the sky.

We’re not pessimistic. We’re just starting Advent!

The season of Advent, the four Sundays that precede Christmas, does not begin with a
backward look at the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus but with eerie images
of cosmic mutations and the Messiah coming in all his glory.

That doesn’t seem to fit with the Christmas season does it? Don’t put on that tacky
Christmas sweater just yet. A HAZMAT suit and track shoes might be more suitable
attire for this week’s lesson!

What should we do with Advent? No one wants to celebrate it. Maybe we should
abandon the Advent season in favor of more comfortable and familiar stories?

We might be tempted. But, today's lesson reminds us once again that the coming of the Messiah is not just a feel good story with a happy ending.

When the Word becomes flesh, when God comes among us things change. The kingdom that comes disrupts the kingdoms of this world. That was true the first time Jesus came, and it will be true the second time as well.

The world wants to tame the story of Christmas. The world wants to turn the story into a feel good Hallmark Card TV special. The message of Advent is this: not so fast, the world as you know it is about to come apart at the seams!

FUTURE SHOCK

Now don't misunderstand. We do need to look back and gaze with wonder at the glory of the incarnation. But, Advent reminds us that we need to do more than look back. We also need to look ahead and prepare for what is coming.

When I was in college they had us read a book by Alvin Toffler entitled Future Shock. The book was about all the bad things that would happen in the future when the oil ran out, and the environment was polluted. Fortunately not everything predicted in that book came true, but it was a good exercise for college freshmen to think about the world's future and the problems we might have to face.

In the same way it is a good spiritual exercise for Christians to think about the future from God's perspective. God's intrusion into human affairs in Jesus is not the end of the story. It was merely the first act of a cosmic play that will come to an ultimate conclusion.

We need to get ready. We need to watch and wait. We need to live life on tiptoe instead of a flat-footed self-satisfaction.

Each year during the Advent season there are events that remind us that life is fragile and limited. Each year during Advent sickness and death inevitably intrude on our celebration. The cocoon of denial that we have so carefully woven is penetrated by the cold hard facts of our own mortality.

We might make fun of those who predict that the world will end tomorrow, but we cannot escape the fact that our world could very well end tomorrow. The first Sunday of Advent makes us face that inconvenient truth.

THE FIRST ADVENT QUESTION

So, what would you do if you knew the world was going to end tomorrow? Would you reconcile with a long lost friend or family member? Would you tell your children that you loved them? Would you wrap your beloved in one long tender embrace?

Asking and answering this question has a way of clarifying our values and sharpening our priorities. It is the first Advent question, and it is not a bad question to ask as we dash headlong from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

Now don't misunderstand. I'm not going into another well-intentioned rant about putting Christ back into Christmas ... although I still think it's an excellent idea! All of us will be caught up to one degree or another in the rush of the season. And we may even enjoy it! That's okay.

But, amid all the planning and preparing, amid all the shopping and the parties, amid all the cards and the cooking, amid all the festive craziness that we both love and dread, create some space to think about the big picture. Create some Advent space to be still and know that you are a child of God.

FINDING GOD

In order to do that, we have to see things differently. That's what Jesus was trying to get his disciples to do.

The 13th chapter of Mark's gospel begins with the disciples fawning over the beauty of Herod's temple. To them the glory of God emanated from that great structure.

But, Jesus burst their glorious bubble and predicted the total destruction of the temple in the near future. He said that the temple would no longer be the place where God is found.

So if God is no longer to be found in the glory of the temple, where is God to be found?

In the future God will not be found in the center of power and authority. God will be found in the wilderness. God will be found outside the city walls in the place of desolation and destruction. God will be found on the cross of Christ.

The cross is the throne of the King of kings. It is the place where salvation is accomplished and sins are forgiven. And this is where we will find the Messiah during this Advent season. He is still not the Messiah we expect.

Jesus tells his disciples that the world is filled with false Messiahs and false prophets. We know that. The evil that leads us astray often has the appearance of something that is good.

Advent is a time to pay attention to the details of life. Advent is a time to remember once again that the kingdom of God is quite different from the kingdoms of this world. We have to wake up and be alert.

THIS GENERATION

You may have noticed that in verse 30 we read, “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” On the face of it, this seems like a mistake. The cataclysmic events described in this passage did not occur in the lifetime of the disciples, or did they?

Wasn't there a special star that proclaimed the birth of Jesus? Didn't the sun refuse to shine when Jesus was on the cross?

Didn't the disciples “fall asleep” when they were asked to keep watch with Jesus? Didn't Peter deny Jesus at “cockcrow”? And didn't the resurrected Jesus change everything on the “dawn” of that first day of eternity?

And we know that when Mark wrote his gospel, false messiahs had incurred the wrath of Rome. The Romans destroyed the Temple. And the inhabitants of Jerusalem headed for the hills in an effort to escape that judgment day.

The false messiahs and destruction of Jerusalem are not the whole story. There is still more to come. Every week we talk about the king who will come from glory to judge the living and the dead. And like the early church we should use our struggles as a way to remember what is really important.

The early Christian community was keenly aware that those tragic events were a wake up call. Jesus told the early church that God could not be contained in fancy buildings or the promise of political power. And that community used those tragic events as a wake up call. Those cataclysmic events were a sign of something greater.

The God revealed in Jesus was a God who operated outside the walls of power. The God revealed in Jesus was a God who judged the world, even as he took upon himself the sins of the world in an act of love and forgiveness.

Indeed, that generation did not pass away before seeing the prediction of Jesus come true. And our generation will not pass away either before seeing the truth of his prediction either.

FOR WHOM DO WE WAIT?

The distinguished preacher Fred Craddock once said, “Maybe people are obsessed with the Second Coming because deep down they are disappointed in the first one.”

Certainly the people of Jesus' day were disappointed. Jesus didn't live up to their idea of a Messiah, a military leader who would restore the fortunes of their country.

They didn't know that Jesus had a bigger mission. His love was not just for a chosen few but also for the whole world.

They were waiting and watching for a Messiah when Jesus first came. They just weren't waiting and watching for the right kind of Messiah.

Are we also waiting and watching for the wrong kind of Messiah? Are our expectations for the Messiah distorted by our selfish desires and limited understanding? Are we really ready for a Messiah who loves the whole world and not just our part of the world?

Just as those first disciples were asleep to the importance of the moment in the Garden of Gethsemane so we are asleep to the importance of our moment in time. Just as Peter denied his Lord when at cockcrow so we are in danger of denying what we believe in most deeply when the moment of testing comes.

But, into our world of chaos and confusion and personal failure God in Christ sends a message of hope. When the temple falls, when everyone is running for the hills, then we remember that the time is ripe for coming of God's salvation.

This is the sign. When all looks to be lost God comes to save. (Mark 13:28-29)

LEARNING TO BE GRACE FILLED

When I was a youngster, my family and friends teased me about being a bit ungainly. Since I was left-handed I looked a bit awkward when I attempted to do common tasks. My first grade teacher even tried to get me to write with the right hand because my attempts at writing looked so strained.

I began to accept the fact that this was who I was, a big ungainly guy with size 13 shoes. That's why I was terrified by the prospect of taking dance lessons several years ago. Suppose I stepped on someone's toes? Suppose I wasn't coordinated enough to learn the steps?

But, over time I became aware of things that had escaped me all my life. Coordination and balance are not just God given traits. They can be cultivated by careful attention to detail. A person can learn to be aware of where their feet and body are positioned. Practice can lead to a whole new world and a whole new way of looking at yourself. You can learn to be a graceful person.

I think it is the same way when it comes to spiritual awareness. It does not come naturally. We must learn to do it. We must cultivate spiritual sensitivity by paying attention to the details of life.

Every day we must go beyond just waiting for the next thing to happen. We must keep watch. We must be alert. We must be awake to the possibilities. We must (as one church father put it) practice the presence of Christ.

And as we do that, a life filled with emptiness is filled with grace and hope. We become graceful by paying attention to the details of life.

Jesus will come again one day and all things will be reconciled to God. But, as we wait for that future coming we must stay awake in the present moment.

We must learn that each and every day can be a “little advent” in which the Lord comes to us in a new way. Every day can be a time to discover anew the love, compassion, justice and peace of Jesus.

FALLING ASLEEP

We know all about filling ourselves with the wrong things don't we? What happened when you filled yourself with turkey and dressing this past Thanksgiving? That's right. You fell asleep as yet another team beat the Detroit Lions football team on TV. (Some things never change.)

I guess it's appropriate that we begin the Christmas season by stuffing ourselves until we fall asleep. It is symbolic of the problem. We lull ourselves to sleep by buying too much, eating too much and entertaining too much.

It's just the opposite of how Jesus would have us prepare for his coming.

The Advent/Christmas season is a season of hope, but it does not begin with hope. It begins with hopelessness. It begins with a people who are longing for salvation. It begins with a people who have lost everything and don't know where to turn. It begins with a people who are hungry, hungry not for the things of this world but for the presence of God.

It is in this context that people are ready, really ready for the coming of Christ into their lives. When all other options are closed, when we have exhausted our personal resources and found our idols wanting, then and only then are we ready, really ready for a season of hope.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

A director of music at a large college refused to eat at any crowded, loud restaurants, and when he went to see the basketball team play he always wore earplugs. He explained,

“When your life is music, your tools are your ears, and you have to be very careful. The difference between making good music and great music is often the slightest variations in sound. Therefore I must guard my hearing.”

We in the modern world are always being bombarded with sights and sounds. Sensory overload has created a kind of numbness in our lives.

And that's why the season of Advent is so important to us. It gives us an opportunity to sit in the darkness for a while. It gives us an opportunity to hear the “sounds of silence” as Simon and Garfunkel put it.

Advent makes us sensitive to the nuances of life. Only when we sit in the darkness can we see that fragile light which dawns in the birth of the Christ child. Only when we take time to be silent can we hear the sound of angel choirs singing.

BRING CANDLES

I've told this story before, but I'm going to tell it again because it really gets at the essence of what Advent is really all about.

It seems that there was an eclipse in colonial New England. The state legislature was in session at that time, and since no one understood what was happening, many of the representatives panicked.

Several even moved to adjourn. But, one of the lawmakers said,

“Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. But, if it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you sir, that candles be brought.”

I move that we do the same this day. Into this world of confusion and anxiety let us bring candles. Let us light the candles of Advent. Let us watch out for that day which comes.

But, in the meantime, let us also be found doing our duty as disciples of Jesus Christ. To him be the honor and glory forever and ever.

Amen.