

“The Day When the Sun Will Refuse to Shine” December 3, 2017

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Mark 13:24-37

24 “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.

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.

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 APOCALYPSE

The season of Advent begins with Jesus making a startling announcement.

“In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened...”

This passage elicits more questions than answers.

What “days”?

What suffering?

The sun will refuse to shine?

When will that happen?

The dire imagery continues in this passage.

Not only will the sun refuse to shine;
the moon will go dark as well.

The stars will fall.

The very heavens will shake.

What does this all mean?

Jesus is talking about the coming of the Messiah,
the great and terrible day of the Lord.

When the Messiah comes,
the earth will tremble.

When the Messiah comes,
even the heavens will be shaken.

These cataclysmic images are signs of a new creation. They give us
a sense of heaven come to earth.

We should not try to explain these signs away. Instead, we should
use them to give us a sense of the enormity of the kingdom that
comes.

Advent should always fill us with a sense of awe.

Advent should fill us with a sense of mystery.

And yes, Advent should even fill us with a sense of holy fear.

This is still how we prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

NEW CREATION

There are some who say that we put too much emphasis on the birth of Christ...that we have made the celebration of his birth into something that is too big.

Better to emphasize his life and his resurrection instead of his birth.

I would certainly agree that the way we celebrate Christmas and especially the so-called "holiday season" is excessive.

We do need to remember what the season is all about.

But, I would disagree with the notion that the birth of Christ is somehow unimportant.

The birth of Christ is important, but not because of the sentimentality that we often associate with the season.

The birth of Christ is important because it signals the beginning of a new creation. Advent makes this clear.

The coming of the Messiah creates an a tear in the fabric of the universe.

And that tear in the fabric of the universe has shaken heaven and earth.

That tear in the fabric of the universe has opened up a connection between the human and the divine.

As the Apostle Paul put it in speaking about the new creation,

“The old has passed way.
Behold the new has come.”

LOOK UP NOT ABOUT

I heard a sermon on the book of Revelation once entitled, “Look Up Instead of About”.

I think that’s the purpose of Advent ... each year we get a change to look up instead of about. We make the apostle’s proclamation personal.

We get to say in a new way in our own lives,
“Look!
The old has passed away.
The new has come.”

Long ago God was in Christ.
The holy came near.

But, the Spirit of God in Christ is still with us.
And that means there is still reason to look up instead of about today.

Incarnation was not a one and done event.
It was the beginning of a multi-act play.

Advent helps us think about the enormity of this event. And the songs of Advent help us understand this.

One of my favorite Advent hymns puts it well,
“Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling
stand...”

This is how we prepare for the coming of the Lord.
This is how we prepare for that day when the stars fall and the sun
refuses to shine.

This is how we prepare for the kingdom that comes.

CONFLICT WITH THE WORLD

Now despite the sometimes terrifying apocalyptic images associated
with Advent, we must remember one thing:

The coming of Jesus is good news.
At Advent we learn that God is with us and for us.

But, the coming of the Messiah is also a story of struggle and conflict
with the powers that be.

This was true when Jesus first came,
and it has been true ever since.

When the kingdom of God comes into the world, there is conflict.

This conflict is reflected in today’s lesson.

From the very beginning many rejected Jesus and sought to destroy
him. They finally crucified him.

And the Bible tells us that while he was on the cross the sun refused to shine.

And when he died the earth shook.

The Messiah who came was not the Messiah they wanted. And that spelled trouble.

But, the crucifixion was not the end of Jesus.
It was just the beginning.

God raised Jesus and his Spirit filled followers began to upset the apple cart all over the world.

I love that line from the book of Acts concerning the preaching of the gospel at Thessalonica.

The religious leaders brought some new Christians before the authorities and accused them in this way,

“These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also.”

When Jesus came into the world, things changed. Jesus turned the world upside down and his disciples turned the world upside down as well.

This was God’s way bringing about a new creation.

And it’s still happening.
The coming of Jesus was just the beginning of a new creation.

God is still in the process of creating a new heaven and a new earth.

But, the old will not pass away quietly.
There is still trouble when God's ways confront our ways.

PEACE IN A VIOLENT WORLD

Each year during Advent the message of the angels
... "peace on earth" ...
stands in stark contrast to the ways of the world.

Even those who do not share our faith have a sense that things ought
to be different ... that somehow anger and violence and mistrust have
no place in this season.

I think this is the power of the gospel.

In a world filled with violence and anger and fear, the angels still
come down and proclaim to the shepherds ... to those lowly ones
who need to hear it most,

"I bring you good tidings of great joy for all the people."

God is not going to leave us in our fear and our anger and our mis-
trust. Right in the middle of it all the angels still give us the Divine
message,

"Don't be afraid.
I have good news and it's good news for all the people.

I'm not leaving you alone in this mess.

I'm here with you.
I'm here for you."

THIS GENERATION

There's a curious verse in our lesson for today. Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." (30)

In a way that happened.

We've already mentioned the fact that the crucifixion of Jesus brought about some of the signs mentioned into today's lesson.

The sun refused to shine.
The earth shook.

But, I wonder if this could also mean that each generation must discover for itself the power of the gospel ... the power of the coming of the Lord.

Every generation must hear the message of peace on earth and goodwill for themselves.

Every generation must learn to look up instead of about. Every generation must learn to fall on their knees and hear the angels voices.

If we follow Jesus, we cannot let pessimistic voices drown out the angel chorus.

And so each year at Advent we are challenged once again to believe.

As Jesus put it in our lesson,
"Heaven and earth may pass away ... but my words will not pass away."

Do you believe this?
Do you trust in this message?

This is the great challenge of every generation.
And this is our challenge ... to believe in the power of the gospel.

Can we believe that the power of God's creative word is greater than anything in heaven or on earth?

Can we believe that God's ability to save is greater than the powers of evil and destruction?

Can we believe the words of the Psalmist?

"My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber."
(Psalm 121:2-3)

Such faith does not come easy.
It must be nurtured by the community of faith.
We must sing about it, and tell each other the story over and over again.

In a world that does not believe,
we have been given the task of promoting radical faith.

In a world filled with violence and despair,
we have been give the task of proclaiming peace on earth.

BLIND AND DEAF

Jesus often said that we need to have "ears to hear and eyes to see".

In other words we need to pay attention to our lives. We need to live our lives with a sense of urgency and purpose.

We need to expect something more, something different.

The Christmas carols and the symbols of the season have become so familiar that sometimes we do recognize the earthshaking power of the message.

Sometimes we are so busy shopping that we fail to receive the heavenly gift.

We do not have ears to hear the earthshaking message of God's peace and good will.

We don't look up any more.

We just look about.

What would it take for this to change?

What would wake us up to the importance of this season?

A crisis

A crisis that shakes the very foundation of our lives.

It's during the crisis that we truly learn to appreciate the Advent message.

God tends to enter our hearts through the cracks and the broken places.

One commentator said that in apocalyptic literature the Lord comes...

...where the "sweet by and by meets the nasty here and now."

And the good news is this.

We believe that in the end the sweet by and by will win the day over the nasty here and now.

THE CRISIS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The early church faced a great crisis.

The destruction of the Temple in 70 AD scattered God's people (including those who believed in Jesus) all over the ancient world.

Many lost hope.

And during that crisis today's message became very important to the early church.

Notice how Jesus' message offered hope in this particular time of destruction and dislocation.

Today we read,

"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." (13:26-27)

Those that have been scattered to the four winds by the Roman Empire will find a way back home. Those whose lives have been destroyed will be saved.

In the final analysis, that day when the stars fall and the sun refuses to shine will not be a day of destruction. It will be a day of salvation.

No longer will we be scattered to the four winds. It will be a day when we come home.

The promise of Jesus is important in our day as well.

Our people are also scattered to the four winds.

We are deeply divided by race and politics.
Some want to control us by making those divisions even deeper.

But, the vision of the gospel is a vision that brings us together.

When the kingdom comes, long estranged brothers and sisters get to come back home.

Those scattered to the four winds by hate and prejudice and violence are gathered together by the angels of the Lord.

MORE THAN A VISION

But, this is more than a vision of what will be in the sweet by and by.

We prepare for the coming of the Messiah by applying the rules of the sweet by and by to the nasty here and now.

We are not servants of the rulers of this age.
We are servants of the king who has come and is coming again.

This creates a sense of urgency and a sense of hope.

We have a job to do, a job based on God's vision of peace and justice.

In fact I would contend that we are called to be God's angels.

We called to gather those who have been scattered to the four winds by the forces of evil.

Someone once said that Advent is like the two minute warning in football.

Each year we sound the alarm.
The game is about over.
We need to wake up and get ready.

Jesus talked about it in terms of the fig tree.
In Jesus' day the fig tree put out leaves in anticipation of summer.

Jesus said,

"The signs are there.
Just as the fig tree is getting ready for summer
so the coming of God's kingdom is near.
Get ready."

As we progress deeper into the Christmas season, people will ask us,
"Are you ready for Christmas?"

They mean,
"Have you done your shopping?
Are you ready for the meals and the parties that you have planned?"

But, today's lesson reminds us that we prepare for something much
greater than a holiday.
We prepare for eternity.

We prepare for that day when the sun refuses to shine and the stars
fall. We prepare for that day when the Messiah returns.

This creates a sense of urgency.
And it creates a sense of hope.

The world as we know it can only imagine pessimistic outcomes.

Indeed, in a perverse way we seem to revel in imagining how bad things will get.

But, Advent asks us to remember that since the world belongs to God it can be changed.

This change will be so radical that it will be as if heaven and earth have passed away.

The gospel clearly wants our daily lives to be informed by this hope.

Modern Christians tend to think,
“Since the time of the second coming is unknown, it could be hundreds or even thousands of years from now. Why worry?”

The gospel draws the opposite conclusion.
Since the timing of the second coming is unknown, it could be today!

We better get ready!

Advent invites us wait for hope on tiptoe.

Advent invites us to try and see through the dark glass of the present and catch a glimpse of eternity

...to experience Jesus Christ as he is and in so doing become like him.

The African American spiritual echoes the destruction in our passage for today.

“My Lord, what a morning.
My Lord, what a morning.

Oh, my Lord, what a morning,
when the stars begin to fall.

When the stars begin to fall.”

But, when we sing that song we learn that it's not a mournful song.
It's a joyful song.

It's a song of hope.

A people who lived in darkness dreamed of God's salvation, and that gave them strength for the living of their days.

That's how I suggest we look at this passage. It's a passage of re-creation.

This first Sunday in Advent we dream of a time when the sun will refuse to shine, the stars will fall and the world will be reborn.

And the question for us is this: how is God inviting us to participate in this new creation, in this kingdom that comes?

How can we be a midwife of this new birth?