

“Watching and Waiting” – Sermon December 3, 2023, Mark 13:24-37

More than two thousand years ago, Jesus gave a sermon on the last week before Passover on the top of the Mount of Olives, known as the Olivet Discourse. The Mount is one of planet Earth's most controversial pieces of real estate. The Mount, where the Temple is located, is a pilgrimage place for the Jewish people, and in the last phase of the gospels in the New Testament, Jesus said, “I came for the lost sheep of Israel.” We all know that Jesus was born of the tribe of Judah and was dedicated to the temple in Jerusalem when He was a few days old. We know from the gospel writings Jesus made it very clear to the Samaritan woman that salvation would come to Israel and the whole world. He would put things right. He would bring hope to the world. At the time, much of Jesus’ ministry and His message directly faced the Jewish people, which is an important thing we need to understand. Here, Jesus is standing on a mountain and giving a long sermon. Above the Sea of Galilee, he addressed Jewish ears and the whole world. However, none of the non-Jewish people understood what He meant when quoting the Old Testament. They wondered. What is the sign of his coming? How will we know when it is the end of the age? Doom and Gloom, Jesus said the end times would be dangerous. Remember the phrase “The sky is falling” from the folk tale known as “Chicken Little,” the chicken who believed the world was coming to an end when an acorn fell on his head. Is this the way for us to begin the season of Advent? Regardless of how this culture thinks, Advent is not about preparing for Christmas. It is about preparing, watching, and waiting for Christ to return. Just as the first coming was an event of cosmic proportion, so will the second coming. So, before we dig into the scripture, let us pause to pray.

Father, you go before us. You are the God of our past and our present. By your hand, we were all created for the unique purpose to be realized in the days of our lives on this earth. Though we have no way of knowing what is coming our way, we are guaranteed that life on this side of heaven will be hard. We know we have an enemy set to destroy us. Please give us the boldness we need to operate in the power of your Holy Spirit and to remember the truths in your Word. Amen.

Long about the time most people are switching on all their Christmas lights to celebrate the holiday, the Gospel reading for this first Sunday in Advent brings us to a climax of a coming day when all the lights will go out. The passage we read from Mark is not meant to frighten but to comfort us. We do not know when the end times will come. One thing is for sure: we cannot stop it. Jesus said that only God the Father knows when the Son of Man will return. There is a reason the church insists on beginning Advent here. If Jesus is not returning to make everything new in a future Kingdom, as he talked about throughout his ministry, then any Bethlehem birth celebration would be on par with fantasies about Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. If Jesus is not the Lord of Lords who can come back at the end of history, “Silent Night” has all the charm and all the meaning of “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire.

Another reason for the church to consider the day when the cosmic lights go out in darkness is that it makes people long for and appreciate the Savior we proclaim to be the Light of the World. The hope of the world. We sang those lyrics in the opening of worship today. Light of the world, you came down into darkness, opened my eyes, let me see. I feel that since the dark

and lonely days of the pandemic, life has left us longing for more Light than usual. God may be bracing the church to kick off Advent with an apocalyptic passage like Mark 13, but among other things, such a passage reminds us, and our culture, that the stakes in the Advent of Christ are exceedingly high. The Christ of God did not arrive in this world long ago to help people be a little nicer or to encourage a few weeks' worth of charitable giving to the United Way, the local soup kitchen, or any other short-term local goal. No, the Son of God came to make straight every crooked way, to make right every wrong, to upend every injustice, and to reconcile all things to himself. Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

The kind of talk about the world's end might make us tremble, but the disciples, like many of the early Christians who were going to suffer trial and tribulation, must have found the warning Jesus offered comforting. Mark clearly wants us to keep in mind these verses for the long haul, for there is uncertainty with an absolute assurance that the end will ultimately come in a glorious way that all followers of Jesus should anticipate. I am going to give you the four stages of anticipation. Unprecedented suffering, total darkness where the sun, moon, and stars cease to give any light, the Son of Man comes with power and glory, and the angels gather the chosen ones. The generation that experiences all these things (Mark 13:30) will be the followers of Jesus who will endure everything until it is accomplished. This reminds me of a series of writings.

A popular best-selling set of 16 Christian fiction novels in the “Left Behind” series tells an apocalyptic story about the ending of Earth. Over 60 million copies have been sold captivating audiences where suddenly millions of people mysteriously disappear. In the wake of the mystery, a pilot, his daughter, and a pastor navigate the aftermath of the Rapture, discovering the truth behind the vanishing. In the second book, which follows the Tribulation, they face the rise of the Antichrist, who takes control over the United Nations, and in the meantime, a group of good guys work to spread the Gospel. It is a fascinating series described right out of the Bible, particularly the Book of Revelation. In the wake of these books, another series for kids, consisting of 40 books, follows a group of teens navigating the end times. You might be wondering why I am telling you this. It is because the thought of the end times has generated discussion about faith, morality, and the interpretation of biblical prophecy. We need more of that type of discussion as we strive to maintain faith in the face of adversity.

So, what shall we do with today's passage? Should we read it literally and prepare for catastrophe, or should we receive it, as we will receive the gift of the birth of the Christ child, with gratitude and joy? Perhaps the better question is, what does the apocalyptic vision have to do with us? I want to suggest to you that the most important thing this passage from Mark's Gospel has to teach us is remembering our place in the world and God's place in the world. Just as we believe that God was before the beginning of time, so we, as Christians, believe that God is eternal and will exist beyond time. We must also remember that God is in control of history and in control of our lives. Divine sovereignty is forever. We pray each Sunday, “God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

God is filled with surprises, and that is the great message of Christmas. The Messiah, who had been expected throughout the ages, surprises the world as Jesus shows up in a cattle

stall, born in a village no one had ever heard of, called Bethlehem. Looking down at the baby with red cheeks, we ask ourselves, “This is Emmanuel, King of kings and Lord of lords? For Joseph, it is a surprise and an inconvenience to stop on his way to pay his taxes or to the shepherds who have to watch their flocks. We should remind ourselves to keep our eyes open and watch and wait.

Waiting has not always been a favorite activity of mine. Waiting in line to get seated at a restaurant, waiting for my grades in college, waiting in line to purchase a ticket, waiting in line to get into a concert or ball game. The worst is waiting in line to the restroom. Sometimes the wait seems endless. First, one foot, then the other, and then you find yourself being rude, looking at people around you and maybe eavesdropping on their conversations. But our whole relationship with God is one of waiting. There is nothing we can do or know on our own. We must wait for God to act with grace toward us. The world's destiny is in the hands of a Great Mystery that does not look, seek, or act according to our ideas or even the writers of books concerning the end of times.

During this season of Advent, we are waiting for something big rather than something small. A tiny baby in a manger, the entrance of God into human history who will change everything. We must wonder, this first Sunday of Advent, if this dramatic change can come too soon into a world infected with violence, wars, pandemics, homelessness, and the list goes on. We pray, “Come, Lord Jesus! Come soon to save us.” We watch and wait. An unnamed woman recently wrote, “Let us wait for a tomorrow that is greater than we can create ourselves.” The late Presbyterian minister, author, and theologian Frederick Buechner calls it “the great hope.”

Christmas is not about little expectations. No, it is about God, who will not stop until everything is set right. It is our job to watch and wait, to keep our eyes open to the signs all around that God is remaking the world. Many centuries ago, St. Augustine wrote about the nature of hope. He said, “Hope has two daughters. One daughter’s name is Anger; the other daughter’s name is Courage. Anger at what is - but ought not to be and Courage to make what ought to be - come to be.

Jesus told his disciples about a man who went on a journey and left his servants in charge. He said, “Stay awake. You do not want your master to find you asleep when he returns.” So, we watch and work, and it is those two ways that we wait. The work is hope in action, to love our neighbors, help the suffering, support the weak, and honor all people; the Spirit of Christ is born. I believe in the second coming. Do you?

As we prepare to come to the table, I am hopeful on the first Sunday of Advent that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, you will leave this service as a more hopeful person than you were when you came in out of the cold this morning. I am hopeful that Jesus, through his resurrection power, has already overthrown all the hurts that separate you from God. I hope there is a kingdom somewhere where the least among us finally get to the first of the line. I am hopeful that when you are invited to come to the Lord’s Table this morning, you will not come as an unthinking exercise but that you will receive the gift of the real presence of Christ, and he will be known to you in the breaking of the bread. I hope the bread will feed every hunger in your soul. I

pray that your spirit will be filled with all joy and hope in believing Christ has died and risen, and by the power and promise of God, Christ will come again. Amen.