

3 December 2023, Advent 1
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Isaiah 64:1-9
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

The Advent of Our Hope

The Rev'd Michael Thompson, Esq.

Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. Amen.

The Season of Advent is a season of preparation and expectation ahead of Christmas, when we remember that, in Jesus, God came to us, lived with us, and lived as one of us. In Advent, we prepare to remember Christ's birth, the Incarnation in which the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. More on that on Christmas Eve.

Advent is also a time of expectation for something else, another arrival of Christ. The End Times. The Apocalypse. Judgment Day. Advent is also about Christ's return, what we profess every Sunday when we say, as we will after this sermon, that "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." Advent focuses us on the fulfillment of God's saving work in which God will restore all things to God's original intended goodness. Advent is preparation for and in expectation of the Incarnation, but it is also preparation for and in expectation of the Eschaton, the last things.

When I was growing up, I was terrified of anything having to do with the so-called End of the World. This is often the result of literal interpretation of apocalyptic biblical texts reinforced by pop culture. We've even redefined apocalypse – which literally means an "uncovering" or "revealing" – to mean the destruction of the world. The images we conjure are enough to make even the most faithful Christian afraid: a coming tribulation during which God's wrath causes natural and supernatural disasters and cataclysmic pain and death for humanity. We even call it the "End of the World," doubling down

on a belief that God will destroy everything God lovingly created. These images of a final punishment by the destruction of the world were particularly terrifying for me as a gay boy living in a culture that told him that his very identity and existence were sinful. There was no doubt what side of the tribulation I was going to be on.

These images cause many of us to avoid talking about Christ's return. We escape the terror by jumping to the comfort of Christmas's exhortations not to be afraid. We reduce Advent to a season we just need to get through before we can get to our presents and eggnog at Christmas.

Rereading today's Gospel lesson initially summoned for me those terrifying images from my youth. This Chapter of Mark begins with Jesus warning that the Temple will be destroyed. Jesus also warns his disciples that they will be persecuted. Jesus explains that the Gospel will be proclaimed to all nations, but "they bring you to trial and hand you over" and "[s]ibling will betray sibling to death and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

Jesus also warns of false prophets and that "in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now and never will be." After that comes today's Gospel lesson. After the Temple's destruction and persecution, false prophets, and suffering, the sun and moon will be darkened, stars will fall, and heaven will be shaken. Then Jesus will return. We are admonished to stay alert, be ready, keep watch. Jesus will return any moment now. Well, that all sounds uplifting. It's no wonder we avoid talking about Jesus' return.

What if all of this is not about causing fear? What if what we are reading here in Mark is about hope? What if the season of Advent, in its expectation of both Christmas and the last things, is about hope?

To get there, we need some context for the Gospel according to Mark, which scholars generally agree was the first Gospel written. Let's start by taking a broader survey of the life of the People of Israel.

After the Exodus, the Judges, and Saul, the Bible tells of a golden age in which David and Solomon ruled over a large, united kingdom comprising the twelve tribes of Israel. After Solomon's rule, the kingdom split in two: the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, where

Jesus was from. In about 720s B.C.E. (Before the Common Era), the Northern Kingdom fell to the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The biblical account leads to the notion of the lost tribes of Israel. What may have happened here is the population experienced exile and diaspora. Hugely oversimplified, by the time we get to Jesus, only Judah in the South remains of David and Solomon's kingdom.

The Southern Kingdom, Judah, held on for a bit longer, but it, too, was conquered. In fact, Judah was passed around quite a bit. It was as vassal to Assyria, then conquered by the Babylonians and later by the Persians. Under the Babylonians, the Judeans were exiled. The Babylonians also destroyed the First Temple, the Temple Solomon built. Out of these experiences arise many of the laments in the Bible, including those in the Book of Lamentations.

Judah gets passed around a bit more, ultimately landing in the hands of the Romans. By the time we get to Jesus at the beginning of the Common Era, the kingdom that the Bible says was ruled by David and Solomon had fallen apart and been conquered and ruled by a series of empires for many centuries. For good measure, the people are exiled, with those who return and those continuing in diaspora left to discern what it is to be Jewish under imperial rule and in their new contexts.

Let's fast forward to 66 C.E. That marks the beginning of the First Jewish-Roman War. Judah had been under Roman rule for more than 120 years. In 66 C.E., there was a Jewish rebellion against Rome. The Romans did not take kindly to this. Conflict with the Romans also led to civil war in Judah. Worse yet, in 70 C.E., the Romans attacked Judaism's most sacred city: Jerusalem. They also destroyed Judaism's most sacred site: the Second Temple. This was devastating both physically and spiritually.

Okay. So, what's the point of this highly oversimplified history lesson? Scholars believe that the Gospel according to Mark was written probably around 70 C.E., the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. The author or authors of Mark and the readers of that Gospel are living through what Jesus is describing in Chapter 13. They are living through the destruction of the Temple. They are living through persecution. They are living amid civil war. They are seeing siblings and parents and children turn against each other. When Jesus warns that the sun and moon will stop shining and the stars will fall, that's not actually all that much worse than what they are going through. These folks have been living in a time of great suffering. For them,

it was already the end of the world – or, at least, it might as well have been. They want to know when it will end. When will Jesus return? When will Jesus end suffering and punish those causing it? These are people in desperate need of hope.

That's the context in which we should hear Jesus' urging that we keep awake and keep ready. To these people trying to make sense of how it can be that God has brought about our salvation and yet they experience profound suffering, Jesus responds, "It will end soon." Their suffering is not for nothing; Jesus' return is imminent. It is as if Jesus is saying, "I know you are suffering, but take heart. Your suffering is a sign that I am returning soon. You won't know exactly when, but just keep watch. I'm coming." As difficult as it may be for us to understand, I think this passage from Mark – and the entire concept of Jesus' return in the last days – is supposed to be about hope. The message is that God has, indeed, accomplished our salvation and we will experience the fulfillment of that salvation very soon. But what are we to make of this in our context today?

This message, the message of Advent, is meant to be one of hope for us too. As we look forward to celebrating the Incarnation at Christmas, our hope is in the knowledge of Emmanuel, that God is, indeed, with us. Christmas reminds us that we serve a God who is not content to rest within lofty godliness while we struggle in the sorrow we introduced into the world. Our God is not one who says, "You've made your bed, now lie in it." Our God is one who is willing to get down in the muck with us. Our God gets into the bed we've made and shows us how to remake it. The hope of Christmas is that God loves us so profoundly that God would become and live as one of us, experiencing the joys and sorrows we do, in order to show us how to spread joy and scatter sorrow.

This is also the message of the Eschaton, the last things. We live in a world in which there is still great pain. There is still persecution, war, and suffering. God sees our suffering, and just as God has never been content to leave us, God has not left us and will not leave us now. God comes to us and will come to us, into our suffering, and turn it upside down. God will, as God has done throughout human history, break the chains that bind us. God will restore all things to the goodness God intended. The message here is, indeed, to keep alert and to keep awake: Keep awake for and in hope. God hasn't left us, and God never will.

Amen.