

Mark 13:24-37
How To Be Advent People
First Sunday of Advent Communion Meditation
Dec. 3, 2017

Introduction to Scripture Reading:

Our Gospel reading for the First Sunday of Advent is the final section of Mark 13: the chapter known as “the little apocalypse.” In it, Jesus draws deeply from his own tradition: phrases of this speech are directly from Isaiah, Joel and Daniel, and he includes allusions to Jeremiah, Deuteronomy, and Zechariah. Leave it to Mark to whip together in just 13 verses Gospel fresh Good News that includes two short parables and touches on six different Old Testament books. Warning: fasten your seat belts this text may cause internal turbulence: it pushes us far into the future beyond what we can see, while mooring us to the past and at the same time, splashing our eyes with cold water to awaken to the now.

Meditation:

I want you to close your eyes for a moment (No, your pastor is not inviting you to take a nap during the sermon.) Please close your eyes, take a breath, and think about Christmas. What sights and sounds, tastes and smells come to mind? The scent of a freshly cut Douglas Fir, or perhaps the beautiful tune of Silent Night, Holy Night or the sweet and spicy taste of gingerbread men—starting with the icing first; or the shape and feel of those treasured ornaments that you hang on your tree each year growing more precious, if not more worn and tattered. What images come to your mind?

O.K. You may open your eyes... I’m pretty sure that for all of us, if we’re honest, the memories of Christmas past, produce a complex mixture of feelings, both good and bad, pleasurable and painful. It is a time of heightened emotion: Intense excitement and also deep dread. The hope and fears of all the years come crashing into the living room of our hearts and minds. We remember putting those toys together at midnight; kids growing up and moving away. No two Christmases are the same. Some years it’s a death, a divorce, or a disagreement that rearranges the place settings around our Christmas dinner table. Painful absences and memories can make it a day you are just hoping to get through—a day you would rather not think about, to be honest. That’s Christmas.

What about Advent? What if I were to ask you to close your eyes and think about Advent? Just yesterday afternoon when I was visiting Ruth Hefco in the hospital, I mentioned to her about today being the First Sunday of Advent, and the young adult male nurse on the other side of her room asked ever so quietly, “What’s Advent?” In my response I mentioned the candles marking each week. “What are the candles for?” That was my wake up Advent moment yesterday. We have a lot of work to do to spread the Word, spread the hope of Advent. What does Advent bring to mind for you? You might think, “Oh yeah, Advent is that churchy word that pastors use to keep up from singing our favorite Christmas carols until Christmas

eve...Advent has something to do with those candles we light each week, and the color blue and the four Sundays before Christmas. I know it's not the same as shopping days before Christmas, but it's hard to separate the two." Most of that is true. Don't worry we will get to sing some of our favorite carols before Christmas Eve. But Advent is much more than that.

Today, on December 3, as we begin our 2017 Season of Advent, and prepare to come to the Table, I want to invite you to look up and step up to the call to be **Advent People**. Since Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday this year, Advent is only 22 days long this year — the shortest number of days Advent can possibly be. A 22-day challenge. What does it mean to be Advent People? That's what Christ is instructing his disciples about in the 13th chapter of Mark.

You may be thinking—but Pastor, I didn't hear anything about Mary or the baby Jesus, or shepherds or angels or wise men in that passage. And you are right. This Advent reading is not about the birth of Jesus into this world. This text is about how to watch and wait for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ that is yet to be. That's right—it's about Jesus' Second Coming. Advent is about the birth of Jesus, and it is *also* about Jesus' Second Coming, too. The word "Advent" means literally "coming." Celebrating Christmas, the birth of Christ is part of what Advent people do, but that's the part we know about. It's the other part I want to tell you about today. And it's the other part that Jesus is talking about in our text from Mark 13.

Rarely do you hear sermons on the Second Coming or the Apocalypse, in Presbyterian churches— Definitely not our thing to dwell on scriptures about the End Times. These passages are strange and startling. They employ poetry, and symbolism that refuse to be contained by literal interpretations. Sometimes preachers use these texts to scare people into believing—or to make predictions about when we can expect Christ to come again. But *both* of these approaches contradict the very nature of the God we worship, and they distort the clear message of Jesus in this today's text.

What does Jesus tell them? How does he answer their questions about when and what signs they will see? He tells them flat out in v. 32: "*About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" That's right he said no one knows—not even Jesus. That radical claim met with some resistance as this story got written down and interpreted. Some of the later manuscripts took it out. "Surely Jesus knew," they reasoned. Yet the *discomfort* of the phrase is the very argument that biblical scholars use to determine the greater authenticity. Who would make that up? When it comes to biblical interpretation, one rule of thumb is that the more difficult reading is generally thought to be the more authentic, when faced with variations in manuscripts on the same text.

If Jesus didn't need to know "about that day or hour" then neither do we. I'm willing to bet that Christ's return will surely surprise us. A baby boy born in a manger to an unwed peasant girl surely wasn't the way anyone expected Jesus' first

coming to roll out. And so if we've learned one thing, we can expect that Jesus' Second Coming will also surprise us. Big time.

Advent people do know that Christ came, Christ died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again. Sound familiar? We pray this together during our Eucharistic Great Prayer of Thanksgiving when preparing to receive the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood. I encourage you to today when we pray it during Communion, we let that truth sink in deeper than ever before.

This is the truth that gets us up out of bed in the morning. The coming of Christ into our lives, the inbreaking of Christ into our daily lives is what gives us the hope and watchful presence to face whatever Advent or life may throw at us. People, situations, jobs, things, money, the church, our country, our health, our relationships can all change in the twinkling of an eye. Up against those shifting sands, come Jesus' words, "heaven and earth will pass away... but my words will not pass away." Jesus' words, The Word, is with us, and ready to break in and break through, again and again.

I have a story to share that offers a vivid image of hope, of inbreaking, of watchfulness. It is about Luther. Not Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, but a golden retriever named Luther, told by Mary Lou Redding in her book titled, *While We Wait*. She writes,

"Luther is a very large dog, well over one hundred pounds. He walks his owner every day in a park-like area near my home. Retrievers are hunting dogs, of course, and Luther enthusiastically embodies his heritage. He hunts moles, chipmunks and squirrels with great joy, occasionally catching one if he lunges when his human is not expecting Luther's powerful tug on the leash. One autumn morning, Luther and his owner were walking near a stand of trees that is home to many squirrels. On this particular morning, something wonderful, rare, and totally unexpected happened: A squirrel fell out of a tree, right in front of Luther. He had only to pounce. He was astounded—and overjoyed. From that moment on, Luther has believed that squirrels fall out of trees. The next morning, and for many mornings after, Luther approached that stand of trees with his eyes lifted, aquiver with anticipation. He would stop every few feet and look up in eager attention, waiting for a squirrel to fall in front of him. "

"What if you and I walked through life with that kind of expectation, waiting for God to show up in the midst of our daily activities, for gifts of grace and healing to fall into our lives so close that we can reach out and touch them? What would be different if we lived that way?"ⁱ

Jesus is teaching us to wait and watch with eyes wide open with hope. That's what Advent People do. Wonderful things do happen. Like the coming of Jesus at Christmas. Or like Luther's squirrel. I invite you to be an Advent Person for the next

22-days: watching for the inbreaking of Christ in our midst: eye wide open with hope.

How can we do this? This will be different for each of us. One suggestion is this: For this Advent, let's put our "to be" list ahead of our "to do" list. God created us as human beings, not human "doings." It's easy to forget this. Especially in the run up to Christmas. But Advent people remember this. Spend time with Jesus' words that do not pass away; Spend time in fervent prayer, listen to the divine nudges that tell us who needs our attention and love. Be alert to the people we know and those whom God may drop in our path who are walking in deep darkness, desperately in need Christ's mercy and light in their lives.

Can we do this? I think we can. Let's be Advent people. Let us pray: Fill our every moment with your three-fold Advent, O Christ: Awaken us to the then and the now and the one-day of your presence. Amen.

ⁱ Mary Lou Redding, *While We Wait: Living the Questions of Advent*, (Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN, 2002), p.24.