

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Sunday, November 29, 2020
Advent 1B / Dedication of Large Mother of God Icon
Gospel: Mark 13:24-37
Preacher: Christopher McLaren, Rector
Theme: How to wait so you can see what God is up to.

Our reading today comes from what is called the “little apocalypse” in the Gospel of Mark. It is kind of call to vigilance, a wake-up call to the faithful to pay attention, to eagerly await the coming of the Lord. Apocalyptic writing such as this tends to come out of historical periods of great suffering, communal struggle, or calamitous events. Does any of that sound familiar? Biblical scholars tell us that this particular writing is a key to dating the gospel of Mark after 70 C.E., after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman legions in response to a series of failed Jewish rebellions. For all of its troubling imagery and darkness, apocalyptic is a genre of literature that has its roots in the human longing for salvation, the leaning toward hope of rescue, of the good guys riding in on their white horses to save the day. In essence apocalyptic writing, focuses not on the present but on a hidden future, soon to be revealed in which things will be set right, healed, redeemed, made new. Apocalyptic literature asks us to look for what is truly real, to look beneath the surface of things in hope of discovering God at work.

It is this hidden future, this surprising in-breaking of the kingdom of God, or “the Son of Man coming in the clouds,” that this passage instructs us to wait for. Over and over again we are told to keep awake, to be aware, to keep alert. There is urgency in the text that is both troubling and attractive to us. We know that there are things we are waiting for, things we have waited for all our lives. They may be childish longings, the horse for Christmas that never came, the sports team that never quite made it to the playoffs. But we all have our poignant and perhaps secret hopes, the quiet hope that mom and dad would rediscover their love for one another and restore the family, that our loved one would be healed, that the child we so wished for would finally come, or that the carelessly lost friendship could be rekindled. We all have these deep longings within us, these hopes we waited for and will find ourselves waiting for again and again.

Advent is about the most essential things in our human makeup. We all wait, we all live with great hunger to be spoken to, to be touched, to be loved, to be known, to be valuable enough to be judged, and honored enough to be forgiven. The truth of the matter is that the things we most desire, the experiences we most need we cannot create or make for ourselves. No one alone can assure themselves of being loved. It is not possible to be known in isolation. We carry a deep need to hear these foundational affirmations but not merely from something of our own making, we want to hear it from something outside ourselves, from the realm beyond our control. We desire revelation, which is what the word apocalypse means. The discovery of the thing you’ve been hoping for or wishing for all your life and suddenly you see it, for the first time, like a sudden gust of wind or a sneaker wave.

As a culture we are unable to assure ourselves of our own worth, our own dignity, our own “lovableness.” In response to our enlightened culture’s denial of any divine affirmation, of a word coming from beyond ourselves to assure us of our worth or value, we seem to have wrapped ourselves in things, surrounded ourselves with toys, and gadgets and objects of great beauty to assure ourselves that we are worth a great deal. At one very basic level our own environmental crisis seems the result of human beings as a species trying to affirm their own worth by using up creation in a way that is unsustainable. We have confused our need of God for our use of creation. **Our insatiable desire for more is what is left of our longing for the divine.** At the same time, our generation is so aware of humanity’s corporate responsibility, for so much violence and neglect, that we are in need of affirmation of our own basic humanity. How are we to be forgiven for standing by while genocide ravaged Rwanda or Myanmar just the last decade ago their burning homes captured by satellite images. What does it really mean to vilify undocumented immigrants who are fleeing failed economies and incredible violence some sending their young north just to try to avoid certain death by gangs and drug cartel killings? What of our own nation separating families seeking asylum at our border, putting children in cages while our sacred book admonishes us to welcome the stranger. We are so deeply compromised as a people. What of our cavalier attitude toward this deadly disease in our own country that has claimed 275,000 lives with no end in sight and the hospitals filling up, health workers fatigued and overwhelmed. We know that the environment has suffered from our hungry way of life our oceans clogged with trash a warming earth of fire and storms. We know that we have developed and pursued arsenals that could destroy the inhabited world several times over in an awful display of self-annihilation. We know that our greed and thirst for debt affects the entire world.

In the mist of all this troubling news, all the moral angst of our age, we long for some kind of word of hope. We long for a fresh word that will put us back on track, that will bring us back into recognition of who we are. It doesn’t have to be just a kind word, it could be a word of deep truth that at once judges us but assures us of our value, that we are worth judging that we are worth saving, that we are worth healing, that we are worth new life and new direction.

All our human longings, our desires to be loved, accepted, known, and forgiven assure us that we are quite literally talked and touched into life. None of us possess life in ourselves. It comes to us as gift as grace from beyond us. All our longings hold within them a danger, that we will attempt to construct something to meet our own needs, this is the human temptation, our idol-making habit. But nothing made of our own initiative can truly speak the words of affirmation, the words of life into our souls that we need.

The Christian story, our story, takes its cue from the story of the people of Israel who were summoned to be a people by God, affirmed by their deliverance out of slavery and nurtured by a covenant that asked them to reject any idol of their own making in favor of a living God. As Christians we too were summoned by a mysterious child,

summoned to an unlikely stable along with shepherds and angels, peasants and wisdom seekers, by the love of God taking on fleshly form. Addressed by something beyond us that could only be described as God's glory.

This child grew up and in surprising ways spoke and touched people into new life. He awakened people to God in uncanny ways, ways that no one could fabricate on their own, ways that spoke to the deep longings inside each person. While Jesus walked this earth he was constantly waking people up, wiping the sleep from their eyes, pulling them out of their dreams into a reality that made them feel so alive, so free, so open to God that one realized that they had been spoken to by something beyond themselves, something beyond just a merely human companion. In and through Jesus people heard the words they most needed to hear, you are loved, you are valuable, you can change, you can be forgiven, you are worth my judgment, you matter.

The person of Jesus was and is a being too wild to be domesticated, too unpredictable to be made into an idol though it has been tried many times. In the end Jesus was killed not because he was found boring or irrelevant but rather because he was found to be dangerous to the status quo. His death, however, had a curious effect. For some reason his followers seemed to grow stronger and to feel in their very bones that in a real way Jesus' life continued unseen and that in time he would come back, that there would be another Advent of this life-affirming person. In fact, the early followers of Jesus sensed in their very bones, in the center of their souls, the ongoing life and love of Jesus so strongly that they described it as the Holy Spirit working within them. They began to sense that God was at work in the world in surprising ways, even though Jesus was no longer with them physically.

They remembered strange stories that Jesus told, like the one about the fig tree which seemed to say that if you want to know what God is up to you can begin by attending to the ordinary world around you. The world it seems is full of parables happening on every street corner and in every office cubicle. There are clues to the kingdom of God in every nook and cranny of the earth but most of us are not looking for them. By saying hey look at this fig tree, Jesus was saying look for the signs of new life around you and you will find me there at work. You don't have to look too hard; you don't need to focus on earthquakes or hurricanes to see me. I'm at work almost everywhere, in the online worship experience, in a South African prison, in the legal team discovering new evidence that frees a death row inmate from prison, in a youth program in the south valley, in an Arizona border town, and the Montessori playground if you just have eyes to see it. I'm at work in the most ordinary of events in your life.

Advent is the reminder that all around us God is trying to tell us something. That through the mundane and ordinary aspects of life God is reaching out to touch us, to address us, to speak into our lives. Advent reminds us that we are not alone, or if we think we are, Christmas will and has shattered that aloneness forever. God will

invade his own universe. God has addressed us in such an ordinary and surprising way that we cannot escape into isolation.

As one of our members expressed it, this time of COVID-19 has been like an extended Advent Season, waiting and longing for change, for God to rip open the heavens and come down to make things new, bring a vaccine, offer a cure, heal our torn country. The point of Advent is not only to prepare for the coming of Christ in the manger at Bethlehem, the point of Advent is that God has already come, that God continues to come, that if we will only prepare ourselves, if we will only wake up, if we will only snap out of our habitual slumber we could see God at work in the fig tree, in the difficult words of those who love us most, in the longing to grant forgiveness, in the urge to meet a real need in front of us, in the eyes of stranger, in the laughter of children, in the donations from your checking account, in the pain of a friend, in the surprising gesture of kindness. The challenge of Advent is that God is fierce and wild, unpredictable and beyond our language. God will not allow himself to be caged within our own ideas, he will constantly exceed our deepest longings, and our wildest speculations about who he is. Newness breaking into history, newness breaking into our lives, surprising turns, and wild outcomes can remind us of who God really is, a being who will not be tamed but at the same time is secure enough and willing to come close to us to speak and touch us into life. God is constantly coming to speak to us again and again.

One of Mary Oliver's poems speaks of our work in this life as cultivating our own capacity to be astonished. This is what Advent is about, to watch carefully enough, to wait expectantly enough, to dream God's wild dream hopefully enough, to open our hearts just enough to notice God at work, to be astonished, to let God into our wounded lives to love us, to heal us to forgive us. We only need to wake up to see it and by God's grace we will.