

Mark 13:24-37

‘But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

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.

‘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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 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. 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

The Advent of Hope

Happy New Year! I bet some of you didn't know that; the Church Year starts with Advent, and today is the first Sunday of Advent. I always thought that Advent was just a season to get us excited about Christmas, and Christmas to me had very little to do with Jesus – it was more about Santa Claus and presents. And as I got older I began to appreciate New Years Eve more and more – that was a time for parties followed by a day of rest and food and football. But for the Church, the New Year starts today, and it's my prayer that today would be a new beginning for some of you, a day that you start to see Jesus in an even more glorious way, and God as an ever more loving and gracious God.

Which could be a challenge considering how scary the scripture passages have been over that past couple weeks – talking about being cast into “utter darkness” or “eternal doom,” and today's passage describing a time when “the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give light.” I have a hunch that the reason a lot of folks these days are not interested in Church has something to do with passages like the one we just read today, or rather the interpretation that we give to such passages. As most of you know I love music, and I've been an avid fan of what is known as “indy” rock music, and one of the most successful indy rock bands of the 1980s was a band called REM. One of their greatest hits was a song titled “Losing My Religion.” Another of their greatest hits was a song titled, “It's the End of the World As We Know It (and I Feel Fine).” They were both excellent songs musically, but I think the lyrics really connected with young people. The last 50 years has seen a great decline people's involvement in the church in this

country, and part of the reason has to do with what many so called experts claim to be the Bible's depiction of "the end of the world." I would guess that there are some who are here because they dread what might happen to them if they *don't* stay connected to the church, because some day a very angry God is going to unleash a whole lot misery on this world, and if you're not on the right side you may end up in a lake of fire. But I would guess that there are a lot of people who are *not* here because they don't buy the picture that many in the church have painted for them of "the end of the world," and so they "losing their religion" and they feel fine. And these people are not morally bankrupt or criminal; many of them behave better than Christians or other "religious" people. And as the church loses its influence it's tempted to rely on scare tactics – like "end of the world" images and prophecies – to draw people back into the church, and this tactic simply backfires. And the true irony is that so many Christians call the message about judgment and apocalypse "good news!" Their "good news" is that you won't go to hell in a hand basket if you profess faith in Jesus Christ. But I don't believe that that was the "good news" that Jesus declared, and I hope that what you hear from me today will truly be good news for you as we start this new year. And I hope that you will share this real "good news" with others so that their lives will be changed.

Because today's scripture passage may be more about Jesus' first coming more than about his Second Coming, more about what Jesus *has done* than what Jesus *will do*, and how that affects you in the here and now, not how it affects you in the future. While Mark's Jesus talks about the sun and the moon being darkened and the stars falling from heaven falling from heaven and the Son of Man coming in the clouds, he also tells us this little parable about keeping awake, and he tells it at the point in Mark's gospel *just before* Jesus is arrested. David Lose wrote an excellent commentary (<http://www.davidlose.net/2014/11/advent-1-b/>) where he notes that Jesus tells the servants that they do not know whether the master will come back to his house in the *evening*, or at *midnight*, or at *cockcrow*, or at *dawn*. Mark uses these same time markers in the following chapter to divide the scenes that lead up to the crucifixion:

- 1) Last Supper, beginning, "When it was *evening* he came with the twelve..." (14:17).
- 2) Jesus' prayer and betrayal: "And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy" (14:40) because it was the *middle of the night*.
- 3) At the close of Jesus' trial, Peter's denies Jesus for the third time just as the *cock crowed* for the second time" (14:71-72a).
- 4) And then Jesus is delivered to Pilate for trial "As soon as it was *morning*"(15:1).

Was it simply a coincidence that Jesus uses the same words to warn his disciples to "stay awake" as Mark does when he tells of Jesus' arrest and trial? Or is Mark trying to say that Jesus truly and authentically comes to us as he is nailed to the cross and we see God's love on display in a manner that we could not have imagined? And could he be reminding us that the crucifixion is where God won the true victory over sin and death as we look upon this love that is shed for the entire world, as our eyes are opened to a divine love that expresses itself by accepting all the brutality and mockery and deceit and cowardice that so fills the human heart and says, "I love you regardless"?

So while we anticipate Jesus' return during this Advent season, our hope is grounded in the meaning of that first Advent over 2000 years ago when God entered our world in the form of a poor, vulnerable child who would grow up to show us God's amazing love in the form of a poor, vulnerable man willing to suffer and die to show us what God's love and God's kingdom are all about.

And when the meaning of that first Advent becomes clear to us, when we look upon Jesus as the One who came into this world to take away *not only OUR sins but the sins of the world*, when we understand that this divine act of God was not conditional upon our goodness or grace but was freely done on our behalf, our hearts may be warmed and encouraged in the here and the now. And as we wait for Jesus' return, we may do so with excitement and not dread. We may "stay awake" not in fear of apocalypse but in hope of new world order. We may stay awake not so much as a condemned prisoner might lie awake anticipating execution but more as a child might stay awake waiting for Santa Claus to arrive.

So my prayer is that the impact of that first Advent would remind you of the great hope that we hold in Christ, that he has truly carried away the sins of the world, yours and everyone else's. Knowing that, we can look at each other and find peace despite our differences. Knowing that, we can look to the future not with dread but with confidence that the day is coming when Christ will not only rule in our hearts but in the hearts of all people.