

Advent 1, November 29, 2020 (Mk 13:24-37; Ps 80:1-7, 17-19; Is 64:1-9)

The holy gospel according to Mark, the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter (13:24-37)

Two days before the Passover, the *Last Supper* of Jesus, he said to his disciples: **In those days (the end times) the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken** (this description of the undoing of creation draws on Isaiah 13, 24, 34; Ezekiel 32; Joel 2; Amos 8). **At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angel and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. But about that day or hour no one know, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: he leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with an assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: "Watch!"** This is the gospel of our Lord.

An old *Classic Peanuts* cartoon showed a discussion between Lucy and Charlie Brown. In the first three frames Lucy says, "I don't worry about the world coming to an end any more. -- The way I figure it, the world can't come to an end today because it's already tomorrow in some other part of the world! -- Isn't that a comforting theory?" Charlie Brown responds, "I've never felt so comforted in all my life."

There's a huge difference between biblical and modern views of the end of the world. Most people in the Middle East in the centuries before Jesus' birth eked out a hand-to-mouth, day-to-day life of toil and labor. There were no days off. They even neglected to **remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.**

The poor were made poorer by the taxes imposed from above. Just as in today's world, there was an ever-widening gap between the *haves* and the *have-nots*. The best hope for most laborers was that there wouldn't be a catastrophe on top of an already almost-impossible existence.

They looked forward to the coming of God's Messiah, because he would right the wrongs, lift up the poor and needy, and punish the arrogant and oppressive rulers.

At the end of the sixth century BC, in the holy city of Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah spoke. Most of the Jews living there had been captive in Babylon for 60 years. When the Babylonian Empire was defeated by the Persian Empire, they'd been allowed to return to their homeland. All the way home they rejoiced, because Isaiah had promised this homecoming. They could hardly wait to worship *their* God in *their* temple, right there on Mount Zion, God's own dwelling.

But their hopes were shattered. They'd expected a rebuilt Jerusalem, a renewal of God's people, and life as it had been before the Exile. Instead, they found the temple in ruins, conflict among the leaders, and famine throughout the land.

In some ways it was worse than leaving Egypt in the Exodus, only to wander for forty years in the wilderness before being allowed to enter the Holy Land. That time, they'd known they would have to build it all from scratch. Now their release from captivity was bitter. In Babylon they'd had homes and livelihoods. Their families had lived well, preserved from the famine that raged in most of the world. The return to Jerusalem was beyond grim.

How could they even believe in God anymore? He'd let his holy house be demolished. The walls of the great city were torn down, and the wandering pilgrims were lost without political or religious leadership.

Into this devastation came the words of Isaiah. *Where are you, God?* he cried. *Show yourself! We've seen your wonders and marvels before, **when you did awesome deeds we did not expect.** Never in all the history of the world has there been a God like you.*

I love the next verse: **You were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed. . . . You have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.** Do you hear what I hear? They're blaming God for their sins! God was angry, so they sinned; God hid himself, and they transgressed. I think they have it backwards! Their self-centeredness and idolatry came before God's anger; their greed and arrogance preceded God's withdrawal!

But finally they acknowledge the truth of their situation: **Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.**

**Tear open the heavens and come down**, cries Isaiah. **Stir up your strength and come to help us**, cries the psalmist. Get us out of here, good Lord!

And then we hear Jesus talking about the end of the world, answering his disciples, who'd asked him when it would come, and how they would know it was coming.

In his previous words in chapter 13 of Mark's gospel, Jesus has described **wars and rumors of wars; earthquakes and famines; false messiahs; persecution of the faithful; and betrayal of family members by those they love.**

Today's verses begin after that suffering—and these are words of *hope* and *promise*: **The Son of Man will come in clouds with great power and glory; he will send out his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.**

Listen to the promise! We need have no fear of that day! When it comes—and it *will* come, sooner or later to each of us—when it comes, we'll leave all this suffering behind.

We see and hear the suffering of millions—*billions*—of people God loves. And we can share the biblical hope that God will soon **tear open the heavens and come down**. Only then will there be peace on earth.

**Wars and rumors of wars; earthquakes and floods; false messiahs; persecution of the faithful; betrayal of family members by those they love.** COVID 19; electoral chaos; economic disasters. Sometimes it seems too much to bear.

Advent—which means *coming*—is a season of waiting. We live in the time of “already but not yet.” We live

- between last week's celebration of Christ as King of the universe—and the birth of God-in-the-flesh just four weeks from today.
- Between the promise of peace on earth, good will to all—and the final end to all war and strife.
- Between God's victory over death and the devil at the resurrection of Jesus—and our own rising from the grave at the last judgment.

**Already, but not yet.**

And because of the promises, Advent is a season of joy. It's a time of hope amid crises, light in deep darkness, a growing trust in the promises of God. Advent offers a new way of looking at the world and our troubled humanity.

**Don't be afraid**, the angel will say to Mary when she first learns that she will give birth to God's own Son. **Don't be afraid**, the angel will say to Mary at the stone tomb in the garden on the first Easter morning.

Don't spend too much time trying to work out the details of when and how Jesus will come again. The truth is, Jesus has already come not once, not twice, but *thousands* of times, billions of times as Emmanuel, God-with-us, our Savior (James E. Brenneman, *Christian Century*, 11/18/08, p. 21).

The Advent of God happens every time we repent, every time we turn from our sins to seek God's forgiveness. Advent isn't only *waiting*, it's also *receiving*.

Let us pray: **Almighty God, you came to us long ago in the birth of Jesus Christ. Be born in us anew today by the power of your Holy Spirit. We offer our lives as home to you, and ask for grace and strength to live as your faithful, joyful children always. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen** (Job and Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer*, p. 14).