

12-3-17 Sermon: “He is Coming...But When?” – Isaiah 64 and Mark 13

Y’all.

Today is the day I have been waiting for all year long. In case you somehow missed it (or were asleep for the first half of worship), today is the First Sunday of Advent. As Deirdre and Jolie reminded us this morning, Advent means “coming.” And so this is the season of the church year when we wait, and watch, and we light candles, one-by-one as witness to our hope that our Lord Jesus Christ will come again, into our world and into our hearts.

And, what better way to kick off the Advent season than a bizarre, cryptic, apocalyptic text from the Gospel according to Mark? Right?! I mean, we’ve hung the greens, and lit the candles, now it’s time to talk about the sun and moon going dark and the stars falling from the sky! We’re singing carols and drinking hot cocoa; what better way to set the mood for an unspecified time of great suffering, and the Lord coming like a thief in the night?!

Suffice it to say that Mark 13 is not the most popular, dearly beloved Gospel reading in the Presbyterian Church. It is abrupt, startling, disconcerting, even frightening.

In general, we Christians tend to react to apocalyptic texts like this in one of two ways. Some of us like to just...ignore them. This isn’t really a Gospel lesson for polite company, is it? It’s 2017, after all, and if Christ *is* coming back, he’s sure taking his sweet time! When we read about the Son of Man coming on the clouds, about earthquakes and famines and stars falling from the sky...many of us are inclined to say we’ve entered the realm of crazy-talk.

On the other hand, others of us who are Christians read this text and go full-scale, dispensationalist, rapture-ready. We start looking for codes and signs so that we can construct exactly what is going to happen, and where, and when. Perhaps the first people who come to mind when we think of this kind of reaction are folks like Harold Camping or the authors of the notorious *Left Behind* book series. But, as it turns out, we Christians have been predicting the end since the very beginning. Bishop Clement of Rome taught that Christ would come in the year 90 CE. Generations later, St. Martin of Tours said it would be the year 400. The medieval church went into a panic during the lesser-known Y1K crisis at the end of the first millennium. The Shakers had their money on 1792; John Wesley said mid-1800s. Various Jehovah’s Witnesses have predicted the Second Coming in 1914, 15, 18, 20, 25, 41, and 75. And that’s just to name a few.

Now, it bears mentioning that all this speculation is exactly what Jesus tells us *not* to do in today’s text. “About that day or hour no one knows,” Jesus says. “Neither the angels in heaven, nor even the Son” – not even Jesus himself – “but only the Father.” In other words, even the most well-intentioned attempt to predict ‘The End’ is a waste of time.

So, what *are* we supposed to make of this Second Coming business? Our faith does not call us to go out and buy rapture insurance, but neither does it allow us to simply ignore these enigmatic texts. As Christians, we are called to take seriously the witness of Scripture, the crux of Advent, our hope and faith that Jesus *will* come again. That the world as it is now is not the world as it will always be.

So...what do we do?

If I understand what the Spirit is saying through the texts we heard today, I think the answer might be that we are asking the wrong question. That Advent is not about *when* Jesus will come again. Advent is about learning how to live in the meantime. Christ has come, and Christ will come again. God’s Kingdom has already begun to take hold in Jesus Christ, but it is not yet

fully here. What does it mean to be a disciple in this strange in-between? How do we follow the Lord we trust *is* coming even as we live in the here and now?

To *that* question, Advent offers us a simple and somewhat frustrating answer: Wait. Practice hope, and peace, and joy, and love, but as you do all of this: wait.

But the thing is, this Christian kind of waiting is not meant to be a passive activity. No, we are called to an active, diligent, tensive waiting, a waiting charged with passion and emotion. A kind of waiting that we might call *hope*.

UCC Pastor Martin Copenhaver¹ describes it as the difference between a young girl on a street corner waiting for the school bus to arrive – a passive, disinterested waiting – and that same girl on that same corner waiting for a parade to pass by, a parade that she can hear but cannot yet see. Waiting for the parade, the girl stands on tiptoe, cranes her neck to see. She waits with expectation and anticipation, with her heart and her throat and her dreams soaring. *That*, he says, is the kind of waiting to which Christ calls us. The kind of waiting that we might call hope.

Or, suggests Rev. Copenhaver, active waiting is like fly-fishing. A fisherman waiting for the spring to arrive may be overcome with boredom and drudgery. He may find the waiting burdensome. But when that same fisherman is standing in the stream, rod cast and waiting for the trout to bite, he is a man transformed. That kind of waiting is a joyful, hopeful anticipation of what is to come. No one has to tell the dedicated fly-fisher to stay alert or keep awake, for as he stands in the silence of the stream already brimming over with life and expectation and hope.

Living and waiting in hope means keeping alert and attending to the task at hand – to our active, faithful discipleship. But practicing hope also involves a certain level of vulnerability. When we open ourselves and our hearts to hope, we also open ourselves to the possibility that our hopes will be disappointed. A heart that is hopeful is a heart that can be broken. And we know far too well, don't we, that we live in a world where hopes are disappointed, and hearts are readily broken.

“O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” the Prophet Isaiah cries. “Come down and set things right! Make this world ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’ Come down, O God, and save your world and your people!”

We understand that longing, don't we? We may not pray for the stars to fall and the mountains to shake, but we know what it is like to cry out, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel!” We, too, can sing “Come, thou long-expected Jesus...From our fears and sins *release* us; let us find our rest in thee.”

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Hope is active, passionate waiting. Hope is lending our love and our lives to the world we *want* to be possible. In the words of Pastor Patricia de Jong,² “Hope is what comes when a broken heart is willing to be mended. Hope is living with our hearts broken open so that compassion, caring, and God's reckless love can find a way into our hearts and into the heart of the world.” Hope is not a feeling; hope is an active choice to live as Christ taught us. Hope means to keep our lights shining, because more often than not, hope is a practice we wage in the dark.

This is what we do during this season of Advent: we wait, and we watch, and we hope. We keep doing the work of discipleship: keep proclaiming the good news, keep offering ourselves to the poor. Keep opening our arms wider and wider to the people around us because that is what Jesus taught us to do while he was on earth, and that is what it looks like to live as disciples – as people of hope – until he comes back.

He is coming...but when?

I don't know. Nobody knows the day or the hour. But I can tell you this. We begin to experience Christ's coming when we choose to practice hope. When we open our hearts to the possibility that the holy God could break into our ordinary lives. When we allow ourselves to believe that our God will come to us not by tearing open the heavens in clouds of glory, but in the birth of a tiny, vulnerable child.

So friends, this Advent let us practice hope. Let us lift our hearts up to God, even and perhaps *especially* if our hearts are broken. For it is into those broken spaces that Christ comes, again and again, to save us and claim us as God's own. Alleluia. Amen.

¹ Feasting on the Word, "Homiletical Perspective", Year B, Vol. 1, p. 23.

² Feasting on the Word, "Pastoral Perspective," Year B. Vol 1, p. 4-6.