

“Welcome to Advent!”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Mark 13:24-37

²⁴[Jesus continued,] “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶“Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷Then 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.

²⁸“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. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

³⁴It 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. ³⁵Therefore, 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, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Welcome to Advent!

Things feel different this year, don't they? As one colleague observed, “This is the most Adventy Advent ever.” If you think about it, we're living waiting in a new way. Another said that this year's Advent will be the longest ever. How? Well, in many ways, Advent begins not today, but started about eight months ago when the pandemic broke out in earnest. We've been waiting and waiting for the coronavirus to pass, but it's still here with us. And in some ways, things might even seem apocalyptic, as we've once again begun to hear threats of overwhelmed emergency rooms and the long-feared “second wave” inundating us with misery. Some commentators forecast the bottom falling out of the economy. Again.

So, welcome to Advent!

And it is in this frame of mind that I invite you to contemplate this morning's lesson, the appointed Gospel text for this day. Now, you may ask, “Where's John the Baptist?

Shouldn't he be wandering around the desert, eating bugs, and calling us to repent?" And my answer is, not yet.

"Well then," you wonder, "what about Mary? She's supposed to be pregnant and singing the Magnificat before Christmas." Again, I say, she'll be here when she needs to be here. No, today we begin this season of anticipation and repentance with a text taken from what has been dubbed Mark's "Little Apocalypse."

Whoa! Didn't we read something from Revelation recently? Are we still focusing on the end of the world? Nope. We weren't then, and we aren't now. You'll recall that Revelation is a vision, not a prophecy of the End Times. And neither is this text of the "doom and gloom" genre—instead, it heralds a great inbreaking of God's reality into our cosmos.

Now, I'll concede that this may possibly be the most indigestible passage in this Gospel. It's so strange and *Sturm und Drang-y*. But Jesus' coming to us justifies the dramatics, the over-the-top-ness of this lection.

Mark knew that Jesus had been dead and buried—and resurrected. He knew the questions that all of those modern wise guys and gals would ask about things not coming to pass as predicted. He knew all of this 2,000 years ago. Heck, the early church knew it. And what they recognized is that those questions are all beside the point. Take a moment to focus on the end of the passage, and you'll recognize a thematic trope familiar from the last few weeks: uncertainty, our inability to know the hour at which Jesus will return.

But what we *do* know is when he first came. And we know it was a seismic event, one that requires us to actually step back and contemplate the huge, world-altering drama that occurred on that long-ago Christmas Eve and, miraculously, happens again and again: God, Immanuel, has come to be with us.

Think about that. Really, really think about that.

What's astounding about God's coming to us isn't just that he bothered to come at all. It's the way he came, the way he intentionally upended everything.

Today's world seems to gravitate to the biggest, the brashest, the noisiest. In the movies and television, we usually look to the most beautiful, the most handsome; in sports, the fleetest of foot, the strongest in body. We inhabit a world of superlatives. And while it is possible to bemoan the modern age of celebrity, we're following a path that was first trod long ago. Who has the biggest economy, the largest cities, the most powerful army, the most impressive navy?

Admit it, we usually like *big*.

And all too often in life, many of us seek to bulldoze our way through problems. All too often, nations hope they can bomb their way to peace.

But God doesn't work that way.

Honestly.

Which is why we need this season in particular to come to terms with what God is doing, why he is doing it, and how he has done it. We need to discard things that obscure our view of God. We need to reorient ourselves to God's new reality.

Think about the lessons we have read this morning. Something big is about to happen, something life-changing. The prophets have called out in desperate anguish—and palpable impatience. We can see them, shaking their fists as they look heavenwards, crying out, "You promised us! We want change, God! Make it happen! Now!"

Ah, yes, that promise: that God will be with us. All of us.

What God doesn't say outright, yet gently leads us to realize, is that we need to prepare, to get ready, to see things anew. Or, to take a different tack, Scripture channels itself through Jack Nicholson's character in *A Few Good Men*, the colonel who snaps at the trial, "You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!"

Advent is when we get ready to "handle the truth."

Jesus comes to us not in the form of an adorable infant in some gauzy, domestic scene. Instead, he comes in an event that demands our attention. And if we truly recognize what is going on, he demands not only our attention, but our lives.

People throughout the ages have claimed they want change, for things to be different. But how prepared are we for real change? I don't mean a change in presidential administrations but the replacement of our current arrangements with those described in Scripture.

No TV.

No family road trips.

No career path.

And there will be far more serious changes, too.

The very rhythm of life will change. If we subscribe to a belief in heaven, what does that mean for birth and death?

Just how much are we willing to surrender in our lives to accommodate Jesus?

You don't have to answer that now, but think about it. All through Advent. Because Jesus asks a lot of us, though that pales in comparison to what Jesus give us.

Earlier, I mentioned that God doesn't do things the way we do. Recall how he came to us as an infant.

Why not as a fully-grown adult?

Why not as royalty?

Why on earth did God come to us vulnerable, dependent? What was he thinking?

As far as we can tell, he was thinking a lot about the kind of world he wants for us. A world where we help one another, care for one another, sacrifice for one another.

Sam Wells, the vicar at St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, said in a weekly sermon preparation workshop I attend on Zoom that “God is not humanity with a loud voice.” Do you see? More of our penchant for bigger, stronger, louder. God has turned his back on all of that.

I think we often imagine Jesus’ coming—if we imagine it at all—like the description in Mark’s Gospel. We’re aided in that thanks to Renaissance paintings of a Risen Christ descending in glory and majesty from the clouds. But that is something that happens after his *first* coming, as a baby, born in a backwater town to two no-account people. We focus on what the infant will become, if we focus at all. Remember, Mark’s Gospel has nothing about Jesus’s birth or childhood. What matters is Jesus the grown-up. Our world is very Markan in that respect. Too often, we care about what children will become, what they will do as adults. I’m not saying it’s wrong to have hopes and dreams for our children, just not at the expense of knowing and loving them in the present.

Part of the surprise that God has in store for us is an invitation to look anew, in a different direction. Consider the baby Jesus. Not who he will become, but the newborn infant.

Babies are mesmerizing.

We marvel at the strength of their grip, their adorable gurgling, their openness to stimuli. Babies haven’t been weighed down by expectations, burdened by guilt, haunted by poor decisions, blighted by hate. We would all do well to learn from their example.

True, they don’t carry the weight of experience, but that is one of the reasons we are so blessed to have Jesus in our lives. With Jesus, we are able to confront life’s challenges and contend with its demands.

But coming to see that, to know that, is not easy. And that’s why we need to prepare.

This season of Advent is a time of repentance and anticipation. In repentance, we seek to turn away from the wrong we have done, which has turned *us* away from the God who has come to save us, to heal us, to redeem us. And in anticipation, we look forward to his arrival, knowing, perhaps even fearing, the change that he will bring.

How will Advent be different for us this year? We can see it in our church service today, as we have modified the liturgy to set aside the traditional call-and-response prayer. And there is no banner with which the children process to the front of the sanctuary.

But think about what has stayed the same. We still have families involved in worship, children who remind us of joy and wonder. We still have an Advent wreath, a symbol of the common journey we take together during these weeks. We still sing the hymns of the season, old words that equip us to see new things.

Advent is a gift.

A wonderful, holy, startling gift.

Yet this year, it is possible to see it as gift that does not stop giving.

I suggested earlier that we imagine that this Advent is the longest ever, beginning this year way back in March. That's when we faced the first round of lockdowns. That's when we dealt with the dislocation of a world turned upside down. We saw pictures of hospitals in New York, and some of us wondered if those images would soon depict events here in the Upper Valley. Then the immediate crisis seemed to pass, and from April until very recently, earlier this very month, exasperation set in, fatigue claimed many of us. We tired of social distancing, of new emerging threats, of having to work or study remotely in many cases. Yet at the same time, we here in our corner of the world grudgingly gave thanks that our infection rate remained so low. But still we tired. The virus really wasn't going away, and if we were honest, we knew it never would—it would be just another disease we managed. But first we would need a vaccine.

And then earlier this month, the good news we had all awaited came: three vaccine tests with an effectiveness of up to 90%! Hooray! The waiting was over! And that brought us to the present moment. The Advent moment. We know something good will soon happen; it is something we anticipate. But the longed-for event has yet to transpire. The waiting is not over. Still, we wait. And now we ask, for how long?

Yes, we can offer informed estimates, make educated guesses, but we really do not know.

And this, too, is much like the return of Jesus, a thief coming in the night, a bridegroom showing up unexpectedly, a king returning home. Be prepared, we are encouraged. Stay awake, we are told. We know this is what we should do, but it is so hard.

Things seem bleak and dark. Frankly, for many of us, they stink.

But in the midst of our loss, we may be able to discern a brighter future.

Yes, things will get better.

Are we prepared for this truth? Really and truly ready?

How about we look at things apart from our cabin fever, our wanderlust, our inability to gather with friends? How about we use this Advent to recognize that our salvation is closer than we imagine?

Because that's what this is all about. Jesus, the savior of the world, came to us 2,000 years ago, and he comes to us again, in the Spirit and through the church. As we contemplate the joy of a nativity two millennia ago, we should also recall how it happened, in what form, and why. And then we will see that God came to us with a message, showing us a better way.

What if this Advent we made ourselves ready, not just to welcome the Christ-child, but to get ready to comport our lives to following his way, to turn down the volume, to set aside our anger, to be bringers of peace and builders of the kingdom? Would you do this? Would I? Will we at least pray on the idea? We are blessed to have a great church family, but even the kindest, most loving of us have our prejudices, our dislikes, that one thing or person we will give ourselves permission to despise or scorn. Are you willing to give that up? Am I?

It's something to think about, pray about. And suddenly, rather than having all the time in the world, we seem to have very little. For God is coming. To see us.

Welcome to Advent!