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 First Sunday of Advent

Watching and Waiting—in Hope
Mark 13:24-37

4 "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,
25 and 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.
27 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.
*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.*
*29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that **he is near**, at the very gates.*
30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.
*31 Heaven 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.
*33 Beware, **keep alert**; for you do not know when the time will come.*
34 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.
*35 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,*
*36 or else he **may find you asleep when he comes suddenly**.*
*37 And what I say to you I say to all: **Keep awake**."*

The *news* lately seems a little *apocalyptic*—
 so much hurt, violence, chaos, disaster and war.
 It's not surprising that some people wonder whether
 we are entering the 'end times' or the last days on earth!

Mark's chapter 13 is known as a '*little apocalypse*',
 because it talks about signs of the *end*,
 how things are *bad*, and going to get *worse*,
 all before the *Messiah* comes.

The word Apocalypse in Greek means ‘*an uncovering*’,
 a disclosure of *knowledge or a revelation*.
 But it has come to mean a revelation about the *end of time*.

Some Christians treat these type of writings,
 such as those found in Daniel or the Book of Revelation,
 as *precise predictions* of the future, and the end times.
 But in Mark’s gospel, this is a statement about what the *end will look like*,
 how *God is working* in it,
 and the *coming of a Savior*, not a precise prediction.

Mark 13 **starts** with Jesus *foretelling the destruction* of the Temple in Jerusalem,
 which did happen at the hands of the Romans in 70 A.D..
 Jesus then warns that we will see *wars*, earthquakes, and famines at the end,
 then *believers* will be persecuted,
 and *false* messiahs and prophets will come.

In our verses today, Jesus continues to
 Predict the coming of the *Son of Man*,
 and He compares a budding *fig tree* to the expectation of a Savior.
 He ends by reminding us to *keep awake*,
 for *no one knows* the day or hour when the Son of Man will appear.

It’s all very mysterious and somewhat *scary* to think about--
 the end times, the second coming,
people suffering even more than what we see today!

So *why* are we *starting the church year* with a “little apocalypse”?
 That is after all, what today is—it’s the first Sunday of *Advent*,
 the beginning of a new church year.
 It’s the season of *waiting and watching* for Jesus.

So why talk of the *END at the beginning*?
 Well, what if the end we’re describing,
 is *also a new beginning* for creation?
 When *Jesus comes again*, in the midst of all suffering,
 it will be *an end* to time as we know it,
 but the *beginning* of an eternal life
 that is better than we could ever imagine!

Mark's chapter 13 "little apocalypse" is about the *arrival of Jesus*—
the Christ child who has already come,
and His *second coming*, which is not yet happened.

That's what kind of time we live in right now—
the *already/not yet* time.

Did you know that Advent ALWAYS begins
with these end times readings in the Bible?
Because they remind us to be expectant and hopeful,
As we waiting for our Savior!

The word Advent means *coming*,
And because it's *Jesus* is coming, that we can wait and watch with hope!

We use the *color purple* to remind us of Jesus' royal birth,
but it is also the color for preparation and penance.
It is the same color we use at *Lent*,
for the remembrance of Jesus' *Passion*—his death and crucifixion.

In fact, Mark 13 happens *just before Jesus' Passion* in the Gospel of Mark.
The *end* of his life was the *beginning* of new life for all who believe.
See where we're going? The *END is a BEGINNING*.

The Gospel of *Mark* was likely the *first* Gospel,
Matthew and Luke likely used it as a source.
Mark was probably written during the *late 60s* A.D.,
which means it would have been written during a time of
Nero's persecution of Christians, and the *Jewish Revolt* against Rome,
that ended with the *destruction of the Temple* in Jerusalem in 70 A.D..
It was written during *difficult, scary times* for the people of God.
Kind of like today can be difficult and scary for believers as well!

Our world, as we know---has changed.
Sundays used to be church days for people,
and *ethics governing public behavior* were drawn from Judeo-Christian morals.
Today *Sundays are not* just church days,
They are days for shopping, leisure, working, or sports.
And I don't even need to tell you how the *ethics* of behavior have changed, right?

But still, we believe in Good News.

Where is the GOOD NEWS in all this?

Well, we are waiting on the *return of Jesus*.

He is coming back, just as it is promised in the gospels and the prophets.

So we can *wait with HOPE*,

Because we know that one of these days

it will be the *end* of days and the *beginning of eternal life* with Jesus!

The *other Good News* as I see it is that

today Christians who attend church have *CHOSEN to be at church*,
in a world full of many other choices.

That's hopeful, isn't it?

It means that people in church today

are usually doing it not because it's the social thing to do.

They are here because of their *relationship with Jesus Christ*.

They are here because their *faith is their foundation*,

and they need a family of faith.

This is *great news* if you ask me.

It's *not* to say that earlier generations of church goers were *less faithful*,
only that at one time people were *expected* to be here.

And today, it's a very *conscious choice*, in a world full of other choices.

Advent is about *making choices*.

During Advent, we choose *who and what we are waiting for!*

And we choose HOPE as we actively *wait*.

Passive waiting is waiting for your bus or plane to arrive.

Active waiting is a *little kid* hiding around the corner on Christmas morning!

Active waiting is a *groom* waiting on his bride to walk down the aisle!

Our *Advent wreath* is very *symbolic* of our active waiting—

And each *candle* has meaning.

They symbolize *Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love*. Today's is **HOPE**.

We believe these are *God's gifts* to us,

And the gifts we are asked to *bring to others* during Advent.

As we wait, we *are blessed*, and *asked to bless* one another.
 Which gets us far *beyond the commercialism* of Christmas, right?
 What if we brought *hope, peace, joy, and love* as our gifts, this year??

Advent is about that kind of waiting!
 Think about how you wait for other things.
 We could wait for Advent in *fear, or we can wait in faith.*
In despair, or in HOPE.

Our *world* assumes we wait for the future
 with a certain amount of *fear and anxiety*, right?
 Some churches and Christians have actually capitalized
 on the fear of the end times, or being ‘left behind’.

But *Jesus* teaches us to wait in *faith and HOPE.*
 Sure, we will endure tough times, we are already enduring tough times.
 But we hold onto the *promises* of God in the Bible,
 like here in Mark 13, when it says:
heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

We hold onto the promise of Jesus’ second coming,
 and his redemption of all creation.
 But we also hold onto the promise that
God is at work in our crazy world RIGHT NOW!

Jesus announced the *kingdom* of God in his preaching,
 a kingdom that *began* with his ministry,
 and will *continue* into eternity.
 That’s why we can wait in HOPE.

Hebrews 11 says that *faith is the assurance of things hoped for,*
the evidence of things NOT seen.
 We may *NOT see God’s hand* all the time,
 but we have *faith that God is working* in our world,
 and will eventually *redeem it.*

So this Advent, *how will YOU wait* for the birth of Jesus?
 And for him to come again?
 How will you stay *awake*—to the presence of God?

Not sleep-deprived by the commercialism of Christmas!

How *will YOU pay attention and look* for Jesus?

And, where have you *already* seen him?

Remember the *Matthew 25 reminder* that whenever we serve the needy, or the *least of these*, we are serving Jesus?

In other words, *We find Jesus in our neighbors—all of them.*

But how can we *see Jesus CLEARLY* this Advent?

What if we have to *stop, look and listen?*

Stop—in the middle of all our shopping, meals, decorating, and stress?

What if we need Advent *worship*,

So we can stop and remember the real *meaning* of Christmas?

And what about *daily quiet time?*

when you can be alone with God, with your Bible, your prayers?

Isn't that equally important?

Time to not only *talk* to God,

but also *listen* to what God is saying to you.

And what if seeking God is *not* just another thing you should add to your *'to-do' list* this Christmas?

What if this is the *very thing that helps everything else go smoothly!*

What if worship, and time with God

helps us *prioritize* everything else during Advent?

I so believe this!

I believe we need God to tell us what we should be doing, and should NOT be doing at Christmastime.

Worship and time with God is also the very thing

that enables us to *interact with all the difficult* family members,

and to endure the *grief and loss* we feel at Christmas.

Got any of that in your family?

I know we do.

I believe we *ALL have some kind of grief* at Christmas.

But if we are grounded in our relationship with Jesus,
 We can see others as children of God, even the most difficult people,
 And we can be gentle with ourselves, in our loss and grief.
 And that just might be one of the *best Christmas gifts* ever, right?

When we are grounded in HOPE, we have more endurance,
 More peace, more comfort at Christmas.
 And we realize that all the suffering we endure now,
 pales compared to the glory we will have one day with Jesus.

Pastor Tim Keller once wrote:

If Jesus Christ is actually God...in the flesh,
 Look at what God has done to get to know you personally.
 If the Son would come all this way to become a *real person* to you,
 don't you think the Holy Spirit will do anything...
 to make Jesus a *real person .. in your heart?*

Christmas is an *invitation from God:*
Look what I've done to come near to you.
Now draw near to Me.
I don't want to be a concept;
I want to be a FRIEND.

Tim Keller, "Why Christmas Matters," Relevant Magazine (12-10-11)

We all need *Jesus as Friend* this Christmas, don't we?
 May we look for Jesus, and find HIM this Christmas!

Friends hear the *Good News of the Gospel:*
Let us choose HOPE this Advent.
In this season of waiting and watching for Jesus.
 May we find him in our *neighbors*, in our families, and in the world.
 and faithfully await the day he *comes again*, to redeem all creation.
 And for the *hope* we have, all God's people can say, Amen.