

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

First Sunday in Advent - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

I Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark,

[Jesus said:] 24“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.

26Then 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. 29 So 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.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

### **Prayer**

Let us pray,

Amen.

### **An Advent**

BOOM!!!! Today is the first Sunday in Advent and the Gospel of Mark hits us like a ton of bricks. Each year the Lectionary assigns a jarring text from either Matthew, Mark or Luke to shake us out of our comfort zone. Today’s reading, from the Gospel of Mark, is the oldest gospel we have, and the story we read today forms the basis of the readings that we find in Matthew and Luke. So the question on my mind was always this, why has the church chosen to use these lessons for the first Sunday in Advent? They’re a little strange, a little scary, it’s Christmas time right?! It’s supposed to be all mushy-hallmark-channel-feelings and stuff this time of the year!

Wrong. There's a reason pastors get all picky and annoying about Christmas songs around this time of the year, it's because it's not Christmas! It's Advent! In the Christian church the word has come to signify the season of the four Sundays leading up to Christmas Eve. But a quick google search will show you that the word is more than just a liturgical season. It's also defined as "*not capitalized: a coming into being or use...*"<sup>1</sup> Synonyms for it are words like onset, beginning, commencement, and start.<sup>2</sup> So today marks a new beginning, something different. That's why I've grown to like that the lectionary assigns these apocalyptic readings for the first Sunday in Advent, they shake us up! They always surprise me, catching me off guard, reminding me that God is doing something brand new! Do you feel it?! That electricity in the air! It starts every fall, the leaves start to drop, the temperature starts to change and somewhere deep in our bones we can feel that something is different...

The early church felt it too, the rest of the world seemed able to go along like nothing had changed but in that little region of the Middle East nothing would ever be the same. We see this throughout the entire thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, the very ending which we have in front of us today. Chapter thirteen in Mark is sometimes called the "little apocalypse" because of the imagery that is used throughout it. It's a strange little section that takes place right before the crucifixion. It's also called the "farewell discourse," a sort of last hurrah before Jesus is arrested.

What I love about this story is that its ultimate message is one of watchfulness. As a species human beings have always been fascinated with the end times, wondering how the world will end. Just look at the variety of zombie and other apocalyptic movies and shows you can

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Advent>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.dictionary.com/browse/advent>

watch, and just like us the early church was no different. The word apocalypse is rooted in the definition of a type of literature that was popular two thousand years ago, and its focus was on whatever happens next. I hesitate to say the end of the world, because any time spent in the genre reveals that someone always survives, that something new happens, that a new beginning is ushered in...

And so in Jesus' final words for a select few disciples we hear an apocalypse, a message about the end, about what happens after the end, and the over-arching theme is Jesus' call for us to be ready. Jesus uses the words "watch" over and over, it's a sort of mantra for this chapter of Mark. What I find funny is that we've twisted the words and the text around, misunderstanding what we're supposed to watch for in the first place.

We read and hear the fantastic imagery used in the apocalyptic stories and we get caught up in wondering what they mean, and what we are to do with them. We wrongly assume that Jesus is calling us to physically search out the specific signs that he has explained, to "watch" for these fantastic images, all the while forgetting the most important part: verse 32, "*But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" NOBODY KNOWS! I can't overemphasize that enough. People are always trying to put the puzzle together, failing to see that it's not a puzzle that can give them the answers they are looking for in the first place. The whole point is to show us that we can't know, that we won't. As one commentator wrote: "*One of the basic reasons for the presence of the apocalyptic discourse in the gospel seems to have been to prevent excessive speculation on these matters.*"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Donahue, John R., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Mark*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005. pp. 382

So what do we do? We become so caught up in the details that we miss the whole point, that Jesus is calling us to a wholly different type of watchfulness.

At a time when the world can seem so confusing, when things can seem so far from hope, the writer of the Gospel of Mark's words reminds us that a Christian's watchfulness isn't something that is passive. We can't just stand on the sidelines, staring up at the sky looking for signs. We don't glean current events for clues, trying to connect the dots, looking at the pain and suffering of others in fascination, wondering how it all fits into the larger puzzle. No, our watching is an active one.

The answer is in that last little parable at the end of the text. The master has left, and we don't know when they will return. Until then though, we keep doing what the master has told us to do; in Mark 16:15 Jesus tells us just what that is. "*Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.*" ALL of creation, the entire world. And, as the saying attributed to St. Francis goes, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and only when necessary, use words." Amen.