

The Second Advent

11/29/2020

Mark 13:24-37

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the series of weeks leading up to Christmas and the birth of the Christ child. This is a season where, by this point, we have probably heard Christmas music for the last two months and seen Christmas decorations on store shelves for just as long. It is a season of anticipation: anticipating those parties that we usually attend and may still attend in some capacity, whether that be in-person or via some online platform such as Zoom; anticipating what lies within all those beautifully-wrapped boxes and bags underneath our intricately-decorated trees; children anticipating the arrival of a jolly old man in a red suit while parents and grandparents anticipate the smiles on their faces as they see what Santa brought them. Advent is a time of anxiously awaiting and anticipating what is soon to arrive, and that's generally what we understand it to be.

Every Advent, we hear about how the world prior to Jesus' birth was moving about in darkness. The Law had been established, the judges had come and gone, kings had risen and fallen, the prophets were done prophesying on the whole, and the Promised Land had been divided into two kingdoms: Judah and Israel. The people of God had gone through much, and were anxiously awaiting the coming of the Messiah, one who would save God's people and lead them against the powers that ruled over them. Though they had not yet seen the Light through this Messiah, they had hope in their hearts that the Messiah would arrive soon, and that's generally what we talk about on the first Sunday of Advent: having hope. The people of Israel and Judah had hope, and we should have hope, too. So, how then does the gospel reading for today fit this theme? How does the gospel reading give us hope amidst everything going on in our lives?

In the reading from Mark today, we have a passage not from before Jesus and talking about this anticipation of Jesus' birth. Rather, we have a passage from the end of Jesus' ministry, just shy of his trial and crucifixion, where Jesus is speaking about, of all things, the End of Days. We get just the tail end of Jesus' predictions. From the beginning of the chapter to this point, Jesus has been talking about how all the buildings the disciples have been marveling at will be destroyed "with not a stone left on stone." He sits opposite the Temple on the Mount of Olives as he says these things, as if to say that he is opposed to the hypocrisy of the Temple and what it stands for with its religious elite. He speaks about false prophets, wars between nations, earthquakes, famines, persecution, and families turning on one another, even to the point of killing one another. Then we get to the passage, where Jesus speaks of the Sun going dark, the Moon going dark, the stars and the celestial bodies falling from the heavens. These cataclysmic images would make for good Christmas cards, yeah? Probably not. So, what then are we to draw from this seemingly-macabre gospel reading? How are we to pull a hopeful message from these words?

Looking at this reading from another direction, Jesus is speaking here of a Second Advent, a second period of time where we as Christians anxiously await the arrival of the Messiah, hoping with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength for that salvation that will arrive with him. For the past few weeks, as with this week, Jesus has spoken about the End of Days when Jesus will come again and the battle between Good and Evil will be settled once and for

all. He is sure in every case to emphasize the inability to know exactly when and where this End of Days will happen, even going so far as to say that “only the Father knows the day and the hour.” However, this time, he gives us signs, macabre though they may be, to know that the Son is about to come in glory again. Just as the shining of the bright star in the sky was a sign of Jesus’ arrival the first time at his birth, so too are all these signs that indicate his arrival once more. In other words, we find ourselves in a similar situation to those anticipating his first arrival. We live in a world plagued with poverty, corruption, disease, and war, much as they did. We live in a world where Sin’s shadow is too great not to notice, much as they did. As Christians, we are anxiously anticipating the arrival of Jesus, our Messiah, that the New Heaven and the New Earth might finally come.

Put another way, that is to say that, amidst all that is going on around us right now, all the bad stuff that has happened this year, all that could possibly go wrong in the year to come, we have hope. As we look to the heavens and see only storm clouds, we know that there is a Sun beyond those clouds and there is light beyond the grey and the storm. The Light never stops trying to break through the darkness, just as God never stops trying to find us, to bring us back to the fold, and to help us feel safe once more. Amidst all that might be going wrong now, we have hope that God will make it all right, that truth, justice, peace, love, and joy shall prosper through it all. Odd though it might seem, this is the hope that Jesus is instilling in his disciples in the reading and to us as readers. There is pain and suffering now, just as there was when Jesus initially spoke these words, but it is only for the moment. Soon and very soon, Christ shall return, the life we know shall cease, and along with it all the pain, suffering, and torment. The powers that be will fall before the glory of Jesus Christ. The evil that runs rampant in our world will be condemned for all eternity, never to be seen again. The self-exultant will be brought low, and the humble will be lifted up. The hardships of this life will be a forgotten memory, and all that we will know is the Land flowing with milk and honey, a world without the Sun because of how gloriously the Son of God shall shine. A world of peace and harmony will be all that we know. We have an unquenchable hope for a reconciliation of Heaven and Earth where there will be no more shedding of tears, no more pain, no more war; just peace. This unquenchable hope is the same hope that the Israelites had with the arrival of the Christ child.

In the end, by no means can we claim to know exactly what the Israelites who awaited the arrival of the Messiah during the First Advent were feeling. However, we are now in the Second Advent, awaiting the Second Coming. Over the last few weeks, we’ve talked about what we need to be doing during this time of anxious anticipation. We need to be using our talents. We need to be loving neighbors and our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. We need to be prepared not just for when Christ comes, but we need to be prepared to wait as well. Just as the Israelites knew not when Jesus was to be born, nor do we know when Christ is to come in full glory again. However, we know the signs, and we know that God keeps His promises. Regardless of what is going on around us (a pandemic, the election season, troubles in our personal lives), we have been promised Life after Death and a melding of Heaven and Earth in the time to come. Amidst a world that seems hopeless at times, we have something to hope for, something we must stay “awake” and “aware” for, as the passage says. So, I invite you all, as you anxiously await the arrival of the holiday in the days and weeks to come, to keep your eyes not on the Christmas tree, but on the heavens. As the Israelites watched for the Star to show the coming of the Messiah, keep awake and aware, watching in anxious anticipation, for what will surely be the most glorious appearance of all.