

A little background: Mark is writing around the time that the Roman Empire crushed the Jewish revolt and destroyed much of Jerusalem, including the unthinkable traumatic destruction of God's house, the temple. The faithful were beginning to lose hope with the pain and grief caused by these events.

Listen:

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴“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. 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. ³³Beware, 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.”

Like several passages lately, I would rather avoid this Advent text. But here it is, and that's why I follow the lectionary; it causes me to deal with passages I have trouble with! I mean, the second coming, who thinks about that anymore? It feels like an old doctrine we would rather tuck away. But we all can't because, maybe without paying attention, we hear about it every communion: “For you show forth the Lord's death until he comes again.” The Second Coming won't go away.

So, we must deal with the second coming colored Advent. It is the beginning of the church year, and Advent is the traditional church season dealing with the second coming of Christ and the birth of Jesus. It is a season of ambivalence, baby Jesus, or triumphant return when God sets everything right. In church and culture, baby Jesus usually wins, while in academia, there is a strong lobby for focusing on the second advent, or second coming of Jesus.

For us, if we don't attend to the return of Jesus, we miss essential spiritual disciplines of the season: waiting, watching, and working.

So, we must pay attention to our text as it is a traditional Advent text, and as many commentators say, “I wish it weren't!” But in doing so, it is okay to admit the doctrine of the second coming is confusing: is this second coming of Christ a physical or metaphorical return of Jesus, or both? Is it to be sooner or later or

never? For us, the situation hasn't changed some 2000 years after our text was written. How do we make sense of it?

It can be challenging, but we must pay attention since the second coming of Christ is a traditional Christian doctrine, and it begins our yearly Advent season. Like the traditional second-coming texts, the language in today's text is apocalyptic; it deals with the end times and, as a result, it is richly symbolic and challenging for us to grasp with many interpretations.

As we talked about a few weeks ago, some believe the return of Jesus at the end of time is more symbolic and that he returned with the resurrection. Others add to this, saying it is a highly symbolic text of hope that declares Jesus came and returned in the resurrection and that there will be an indescribable final return when God restores all creation. The last is my outlook, which embraces the symbolism and rich image-filled language declaring that the time is coming when God restores all of creation as a real event. This is my hope.

Before today's text, the disciples want to know about the end times when God will make everything right. When it will be, and what are we to do? We want these answers, too.

The early Christians wondered several things at once. What will become of us, and could this be the beginning of the end times or not, or were we wrong to trust in Jesus? These questions were vital to Mark's people as their faith was beginning to weaken. And they are still crucial as we live between birth, death, resurrection, and a final vindication when God sets all things right. And sometimes our faith weakens like theirs.

It weakens especially when we find our lifelong church on the periphery of society, as one puts it, disestablished. What will become of us, and does looking forward to God's restoration of creation make sense? While there is no overt destruction, the once powerful and influential church is a thing of the past as a community hub; it is now one option among many. As worship attendance shrinks and gives way to some activity or just vegging, so does hope for the church's future.

This was the issue in Mark's day and ours: how do we maintain hope in the absence of certainty and with the demise of what once was so central, the destruction of the temple and the demise of the church? Mark answered the only way he could in the words of Jesus: "I don't know when there will be a final reconciliation. God only knows when, but you can be sure it will happen. There is your basis for hope. Even though Christ is not with us like he once was, nor will he be, he will return." What do we do as we stand in their shoes, wondering when and if? Jesus reminds us that while we just don't know the time, we can be certain God will restore all creation. As bad as things can get, there is evidence of that all around us where people opt for peace, love, and justice rather than violence, hate, and systemic bigotry of all kinds. Jesus wants us to know the answer is to wait, watch, and work. Keep alert. Don't give in to despair and complacency. It will happen, and we must be ready and live in harmony with that return. This word of hope reminds us that it will happen, but we have no idea when or what it will look like.

For us, the question is, what do we do now? How do we watch, wait, and work? In our society, **waiting** is one of the hardest things in an age of instant gratification. We are not even okay with awaiting the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, much less with the cosmic return of Jesus when God sets all things right. The season is so hectic that we often rush through it without pausing to reflect on its spiritual dimension. If we want something, we order it from Amazon. We can have it with a click on our devices. We can change to hundreds of channels, and we usually don't have to wait to see something. Waiting is not our strong suit. But waiting with patience is part of Advent. It is the time of waiting for Christmas and God's restoration of the world. And like the build-up to Christmas, we are blessed if we take our time to savor the days rather than rush frantically. Our waiting is active as we also watch and work.

We are to **watch** for Jesus and his Kingdom. "Keep alert," Jesus says, but what does that mean for us? How do we keep alert? We look for signs of Jesus-driven activity in the world. And it is essential to remember that we may not find it if we are not looking for it.

In the gospel of John, Jesus reminded us he would not leave us alone but gave us the Spirit to guide and help us see as Jesus sees. The spirit would be with us in his place. We are to watch for the activities of the Spirit where there are signs of hope as the light of the faithful shines brightly in the work of those who followed him. Those to whom he trusted his mission.

They are all around us, in simple acts of love and compassion and marches for Peace and Justice. You do the former all the time and are in public events that declare unity and harmony, such as Dr. King's birthday celebration and National Day of Prayer.

We are to wait and watch, but we are also to work. We must continue Jesus' work.

Did you know that Jesus had a succession plan, and that we are a part of it? As David Steward, founder of World Wide Technology, stated in his book **Doing Business by the Good Book**, every company needs a succession plan so that employees, vendors, and all stakeholders have confidence that things will go on after losing an often-charismatic leader. He goes so far as to say one of his company's clients wouldn't have done business with them without a succession plan. The client needed to know things would continue with the same excellence.

Jesus' succession plan is that his followers, led by the Spirit, would live out his mission in the world until God brings all things home.

Jesus speaks of our work in the Gospel of Matthew as he tells the tale of the King sorting out the sheep and the goats. Those who are beloved of the sheep are beloved precisely because of how they treat others, especially widows, orphans, immigrants, and other vulnerable people. "As you did to the least of these my brothers and sisters, so you did unto me." What we do is important.

I am proud to be a part of a community that has an organized Giving Tuesday activity where so many organizations are doing Jesus' work; some are conscious, and some would wonder, "When did we see you,

Lord, and care for you?” and he will one day reply, “As you did to the least of these, my brothers and sisters so you did unto me.”

This is one aspect of how we keep hope alive with the sure and certain knowledge that in meeting the needs of others, we are doing Jesus’ work and, at the same time, are ministering to Jesus. And moreover, we meet him again and again in those we encounter.

Another part of his succession plan was creating the church as a loving community where we stand with each other, encouraging and supporting one another while welcoming the world in the name of Jesus. I am so proud that we are a church; all are welcome. All who wish to be a part of Jesus' family of love are welcome here despite all the isms, like ageism, racism, classism, sexism, ableism and bigotry, and hatred based on sexual orientation or identity, nationality, or politics, to name a few of the ways we divide ourselves into us and them. Your uniqueness is welcome here. You matter to us and are welcome here. When working to create a community where all are welcome, we anticipate the kind of community Jesus worked so hard to build, and the type of community God will make as the world is brought home. As we preach, teach, and heal in his name, we must never lose sight of those he cared so deeply for, everyone, especially-- those whom society overlooks. Each act of welcome is an act of hope.

May you find an Advent Balance of Waiting, Watching, and Working as we move to the Lord's table. May you hear it again as we proclaim the Lord's Death Until He Comes Again at Christmas and when God sets everything right.