

“Advent: On the Way” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey

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Today we enter a new Church season, the first day of the new year on our liturgical calendar. Yet it is still a month away from our celebration of the Birth – and here we are, with images of darkness. This is because the story of Jesus, the Word we seek, began in the darkness. It began in times fraught with peril and uncertainty, difficulty in a post-exilic period and difficulty under numerous conquests. The Hebrew people were struggling and without the promise of a savior, their life looked bleak indeed. In their darkness, God’s people looked forward, and believing in God’s promises, kept themselves ready for a better time.

In this Gospel lesson, Mark, too, hungers for God's presence. His community also wanted God to come and break through the wretched conditions of their lives -- conditions of endless uncertainty, marked by rejection in the synagogues, suspicion from the Romans, and increasing persecution from both. The young Christians look for signs; they search for glimmers of light and hope; they tremble at the consequence of God's judgment; and in the end, like Isaiah, they affirm that justice and peace are coming, that the angels are on their way, the fruit trees are about to blossom, and God can and will enter the world again. In Mark, Jesus foretells a day when the world will be radically changed by the advent of the power of God in its fullness. But first there is waiting. Be patient, says Mark to his anxious community, but be ready!

Individually, many of us are on also on the edge, on the verge as it were, in a waiting game, feeling some of the darkness. We are out of work or out of a relationship. We have suffered loss, financial and otherwise. We are dealing with illness. The future holds the promise of excitement, but the foreboding and anxiety of fear. As a nation, as citizens of the world, we are also on the edge, on the verge, in a waiting game. The world political situation makes the future difficult to predict. Will Iraq continue to be a bloody battlefield causing great misery to innocents, to civilians? Will conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians be widened to an even greater and more destructive war? Will famine in sub-Saharan Africa claim an even greater number of lives than the rampaging AIDS pandemic already claims? Will terrorists succeed in executing acts of still more unanticipated destruction? This is the uncertainty, the longing, the yearning of the Advent season.

Chapter 13 of Mark’s gospel gives us Jesus’ answer to Isaiah’s cry ‘God, why don’t you tear open the heavens and come down to us?’ This is an apocalyptic message-- end-time writing that developed later than prophecy, in the face of continuing despair over the human condition. It moves hope to another, cosmic level, and proclaims vision in spectacular terms. There is an urgency, yet underlying the message is the certainty that, although humans have been unable to bring about God's reign, God will act, and soon. Drawing on the Old Testament promises of a new king and a new era, Jesus describes a time when ‘the Son of Man’ will appear with great power and glory. Taken from Jewish mythology, described in Daniel 7, the image is of a special human being, who was expected to come and return Israel to its status as God’s people, to bring God’s kingdom

into being in Judea and to make Israel once again a great nation (as Scriptures tell us it was under David and Solomon). Jesus says we won't know when the Son of Man will come, so we must be alert and watchful for this spectacular event.

It is written with the understanding that Sojourner's Jim Wallis expressed when he wrote "Hope means more than just hanging on. It is the conscious decision to see the world in a different way than most others see it ... to look through the eyes of faith ... to know that the present reality will not have the last word ... to know that God rules."

The gospels are interactive literature. As readers, we are outside the action, yet we identify with the disciples who take us inside the action, And they are personal literature – the message is global, but also individual. Today, let us start on the way toward Advent knowing that the single word that most describes Mark's message is the Way – the way through, not the way to; the way through suffering and struggle, where the final message is be not afraid, be alert. As we read the lesson through twice, we are starting on The Way of Advent in the silence of your hearts, inviting you to each listen for the word or invitation or understanding that speaks to you, that is exactly what you need to hear.

Mark 13

24"But in those days, following that distress,

" 'the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light;

25the stars will fall from the sky,

and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.['

26"At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. 27And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

28"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 29Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door.

30I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away

until all these things have happened. 31Heaven and earth will pass away,

but my words will never pass away. 32"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33Be on guard! Be alert!

You do not know when that time will come. 34It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and

tells the one at the door to keep watch. 35"Therefore keep watch because

you do not know when the owner of the house will come back--whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. 36If he

comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. 37What I say to you, I

say to everyone: 'Watch!' "

What did you hear in this Gospel? Words urging you to pay attention? A call to move from complacency to action? Comfort from the promise of a fig tree bearing fruit? A reassurance when Jesus promises "my words will never pass away"? We have something

in common with those people. We're not living in easy times. After more than 2000 years, we know that God doesn't always act in the way people expect. Rather than sending the Son of Man to descend in glory on a cloud or tearing the heavens apart or making mountains shake, he sent the Son of Man as a newborn baby whose family could not even provide a proper place for him to be born.

It's been said that we are an Easter people, but maybe we're really an Advent people, a people who wait in hope, because we know that God has not ever abandoned us, no matter how much we've ignored God. We're an Advent people, people who wait for God's arrival, people who whistle in the dark and care for the wounded, trusting that God will show up. And God does.

May we live, confident that God is working with and through us, to bring about God's realm. Amen.