

Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

November 29, 2020

Ready or Not?

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 1

Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the season of preparation for celebrating the arrival of the infant Christ child. It is also the beginning of a new liturgical year. Last Sunday, Christ the King Sunday, we ended liturgical Year A. Today we begin liturgical Year B. So, happy new year!! The Scripture passages for the first Sunday in Advent, Year B, do not sound like what we would expect. We are preparing for the arrival of Jesus on December 25. It's circled in red on our calendars. We have Advent calendars to help us count down to that very special day. We know when it's coming. So what in the world is the message from the gospel of Mark this morning when Jesus talks about the fact that we will not know the day or time of his return? It sounds very counterintuitive and not much to the point. We are preparing to 2 celebrate the initial coming of Jesus, not Jesus' second coming! So why would we start Advent with a passage that begins by telling us that the sun will be darkened; the moon will not give its light. No sun. No moon. And the stars will be falling from the heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. This doesn't sound much like celebration to us. This passage in Mark's gospel is known as the Little Apocalypse...and, indeed, it's talking about what will happen at the end of the world. Why, we might ask, are we talking about the end of the world when we are preparing for Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer, to enter the world? That's a good question. This little scene is telling us about what will happen when Jesus returns. Jesus will be seen coming in clouds with great power and glory. He will send out the angels and he will gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. This is Jesus' 2 description of what will happen when he comes back. Heaven and earth, Jesus says, will pass away, but his words will not pass away. This is NOT what we expect to hear when we're getting ready for Christmas..... But, we actually have much in common with the ones who heard Jesus speak these words. They, too, had been waiting all their lives for the coming of the Messiah. And here he was, standing right in front of them, telling them what to expect in the future. For centuries the Jewish people had been waiting for, preparing for, and expecting their Messiah to arrive. None

of them knew when it would happen. The date wasn't circled in red on their calendars. They didn't have a preparation time set aside. Every day of their lives was dedicated to preparing for the Messiah's arrival. When he did arrive, it was without fanfare. And when it did happen, some of them recognized Jesus as the Messiah and some of them didn't. 2 But we are still left with the question of why we should start our preparation time with scenes of the apocalypse. Think back to what you know about the nature of life. It's cyclical. When there is a new beginning, there must also be an ending. Jesus mentions the fig tree in this gospel passage and the lesson we learn is that when new branches and shoots form, we know that summer is near. The growing season has begun. Life is back. We can remember seeing the leaves on the trees turn bright red and orange and yellow in a glorious spectacle of color and then suddenly turn brown and fall from the tree. All during the winter season, the tree looks like it's dead. But it's not. In the spring when the weather turns warm and the rain falls, the tree comes back to life...not exactly as it was before, but larger and more glorious than ever. We learn from Jesus that when something new begins, something else has ended. Destruction precedes creation. In the midst of our fears about things that are passing away is the hope from Jesus that new things will replace them. 2 Jesus has come. Jesus has left. Jesus will come again. We are living in what is known as the "in between times." Even as we prepare to celebrate the entry of Jesus into the world, we know that his time with us here in this world is limited. He brings with him a glimpse of the kingdom of God in what he says and in what he does. He shows us that there is a different way to live. He explains to us that there is a different social structure in the kingdom of God. Remember? The last shall be first! What is cast aside in this life is valued in the next. We live in the time of "already, but not yet." We've already gotten a glimpse of God's kingdom and we know what to strive for, but we do not yet live fully in that kingdom. That's yet to come. Think for a moment...have you ever experienced a time in your life when something happened...probably something 2 that you didn't expect...and it changed everything? Maybe your family moved to a new city and you had to start all over again in school and create a new social life for yourself. Perhaps it was the experience of falling in love and the object of your affections became the center of your world. Maybe it was landing a job that you never thought you could get and you had to throw away forever your sense of being a failure. Sometimes it is the entry of new life into the world...planned or unplanned. First time parents find that their days of a carefree life being responsible for no one but themselves is gone forever. When these things happen, life changes forever. Your life has taken

a different trajectory and will never be the same again. We can think about Jesus' initial entry into the world in much the same way. That one event changed the trajectory of the world for all time. That's what we are preparing for during this season of Advent. We are getting ready to remember the event that changed the world for every single human being...Jew or not; Christian or not...Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, atheist, and agnostic...every single human being. Ever since Jesus arrived, the world has not been the same and it never will be again. In the midst of this apocalyptic description of the devastation of the earth that we just heard, Jesus adds in the reminder about the branch on the fig tree and the new growth. Even as we tremble in terror at the amount of destruction that awaits the world, Jesus provides us with hope. In the midst of destruction is new creation. As old things fall away, new things arise to take their place. It happens in microcosm in our own lives all the time in such small increments that we hardly notice. But the apocalyptic scene that Mark's gospel describes is not in microcosm. It is literally earthshattering. In the midst of that, Jesus reminds us: look for the new growth; look for signs of new creation; hold fast to the promises that Jesus has given us...not the least of which is that he will return at a day and an hour that no one knows...not even him. So get ready, Jesus says. Stay prepared. Stay awake. So many times we get distracted and it's very easy to do at this time of year. For so many of us this year our distractions will be more about what we are missing than about what we are planning...time with family and friends, music in the shopping malls, people out and about, holiday parties, and fancy meals. It's normally a very busy time of year with multiple demands on both our time and our attention. It's easy to neglect what is most important...and that is the time we spend in quiet solitude in prayer with God and contemplating how Jesus has changed not only the world, but us as well...each one of us. It may actually be easier this year not to daydream or get distracted or fall asleep to our spiritual needs when so much in our lives has been disrupted. More than ever, when we feel the earth moving under our feet, when the future seems unpredictable and even perilous, we are drawn to focus on the one who came to show us the way. The time of preparation for the arrival of Jesus that we practice during Advent is much like the time of preparation during Lent when we prepare for Jesus' departure from the world. It is a time of introspection; a time of humility; a time of acknowledgement of how much we need Jesus; a time of repentance; a time of prayer; a time of study; and a time of gratitude as we focus on Jesus and his great gift to us. Destruction precedes creation. Crucifixion precedes resurrection. And resurrection is the great hope of the future. Even as we struggle with the apocalyptic message, Jesus gives

us hope for a better and more beautiful and fulfilling future. He has shown us what is possible and predictable in the kingdom of God. As we prepare to welcome him as an infant at Christmas, we do so knowing that Christmas is meaningless without Easter. Jesus brings with him to this 2 world a sense of hope that God's kingdom will ultimately prevail. We are all facing great uncertainty now as we struggle to defeat the coronavirus that threatens each one of us. It is the invisible enemy that is wreaking havoc in the world...not just the United States...but the entire world. We don't know what the larger implications are. We don't know what will happen to the world economy or to our own economy as more and more businesses close, more people are without work, bills are harder to pay, and necessities may become in short supply. We have no control over any of these scenarios, but we do have control over our reaction to them. We do know that no matter what happens, God is in charge and that Jesus Christ will prevail against all evil. In that we can be certain. As we prepare to celebrate Jesus' initial entry into the world, let us hold tight to the hope that he brings with him...the hope of a better 2 world that God has planned for us...and in the sure knowledge that we will never be left on our own ever again. Thanks be to God. AMEN.