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Sermon: As the World Turns
Text: Mark 13:24-37
December 3, 2023

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²⁴ “But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

²⁵ and 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 the^[a] 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^[b] 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. ³³ Beware, keep alert,^[c] 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.”

I am not expert on the Roman Empire, but the legend has it that whenever a conquering general would return to Rome for a triumphant military parade. A lowly Roman slave would be placed in the conquering war hero's decked out chariot, and as he made his way through the shouts of adulation and fawning crowds, the slave in the chariot would whisper in his ear, over and over again: ‘this will pass, you are but a mortal.’ And in a way, the Advent texts that encounter us in these days and prepare us for Christmas do something similar. They are not preparing us for ease, harmony, and merry little Christmas sentiment, they are preparing us for the arrival of a Messiah who will be more than we ever bargained for, a Savior who will no one can really fully comprehend or grasp, a prophet, Rabbi and King who comes not as a happy wish of his earthly parents, but more of a disruption, interruption, and burden. Even to his disciples he is enigma, they misinterpret his teachings, they fall asleep when they are commanded to stay awake, they fail at very important moments. And Jesus certainly does not come as a happy relief and a bit of Christmas cheer to the existing political powers, who sense his presence will make them irrelevant, redundant, or even topple their order and control.

As Santa's sleigh picks up steam and we make our way through the seven levels of Candy Cane forest, through the sea of twirly gum drops, Advent is that voice reminding us that we don't just await sentimental baby Jesus, but we await a Jesus who is coming to make all things new, topple all that we thought represented stability and order, a Jesus who returns not so much to make all our holiday dreams come true but to make our lives look more like his. As we journey down this road to Advent, it is not so much about counting down the days until Christmas as it is about pursuing a faith that wrestles and struggles and endeavors to come to terms with the notion that in our pursuit to grasp Jesus in thoughts, emotions, and longings of the soul, Jesus grasps us already and unconventionally reads us and questions us and draws us, lures us, nudges us, and enchants us into a way of life and community we had no intention getting tangled up with. Just give me my eggnog latte and warm feels, don't give a community of people that I am called to love unconditionally. Just give me my yuletide and White Christmas, don't make Christ's arrival into the shaking of my foundations or something to prepare for or something I might have to await and work toward.

Tom Gillespie, who was President of Princeton Theological Seminary, recalls an art piece that hung on the 'wall over the coffee maker in the work room of the president's office,' which read: 'no matter how hard you work, no matter how right you are, sometimes the dragon wins.' In other words, no matter how noble our cause, no matter how right we are in our political convictions, our theological convictions, our ideological convictions, our sense of righteousness, fairness, and justice, 'sometimes the dragon wins.' Sometimes our efforts to wait and work for Christ are reduced to rubble. Sometimes our hopes to transform the world are dissolved before we get to our car outside because of a cutting comment or stubborn personality or a series of unfortunate events. As Gillespie reminds us, families experience turmoil, careers flounder, jobs change unexpectedly, 'children disappoint, wars continue, injustice prevails, poverty persists, racism endures.' Christ's arrival seems far off, delayed, perhaps a distant mirage that gives way to more pressing if more obtuse matters. So what do we do when Advent doesn't turn out like we expected or hope for? Throw in the towel? Sanitize Christmas to be more realistic? Turn it into sentimental celebration that papers over the tragedies of life, but also the deep joys?

Such a shallow life of faith would ignore those moments where the light of Christ's coming breaks into our world here and now. Those moments and seasons of real personal growth and joy in the life of faith. Those moments where lives are transformed by the gospel, where someone senses a deeper purpose and calling and

risks pursuing. Where someone else takes the time to help their sibling in Christ notice the gifts God has given them and encourages them to pursue it, knowing it may take them in a very different direction than they may have sought for themselves. Sometimes, the dragon does not win, sometimes Christ's kingdom seems to be closer than our next breath, sometimes Advent brings radical hope when the world around us seems anything but.

So what are we waiting for this Advent? What does Advent prepare us for? In his book *Parish* Presbyterian minister Matt Brown tries to help us set our sights and practice our waiting in an Advent State of Mind. He points us to the original nativity where God comes and appears, not in the midst of our order and advance preparations, but 'amidst the messiness, embarrassment, and unpolished days of our lives.' The Advent of God, the coming of Christ, the fulfillment of the Spirit, is not as season of divine inspection to gauge whether our lives are in order, Brown reminds us, God 'knows our lives are a mess.' Advent is more about preparing and asking Jesus once again to 'help us shovel our way out.'¹ Perhaps that is the main virtue and spiritual practice of Advent. Like the Roman chariot, knowing that life is more than superficial euphoria, but about acknowledging our limitations, asking for help, and waiting and working for transformation on there is zero evidence for it. Perhaps a better Advent calendar would count how many times we let the mess tumble in, the person in need before us hijack our meticulous timetable, and God to speak most loudly or show up most surprisingly, not in our triumphs at all, but in those moments we thought the dragon had won, we were at our wit's end, and the arrival of God seemed an infinite distance away. But it is in the cracks and corners and crevices that Advent enters. In Leonard Cohen's words, 'there is a crack, a crack in everything and that's how the light gets in.'

This Advent pay attention to the cracks; may attention to the calls for help; pay attention to the places the rest of the world gladly ignores and intentionally averts the gaze. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, 'God turns to the very places, human beings (we) turn away from.' So to that end, may your Advent lead you to encounter the coming of Christ, in Matt Brown's words, 'in the cracked porcelain of our relationships; amidst the dark corners into which we have backed ourselves; amidst the failure of will to forgive or be forgiven; amidst the hungry and the homeless and even the prideful who callously neglect them.' Advent teaches us to look for the coming of Christ, 'not in the airbrushed portraits of our lives that we want everyone to see, but amidst the pain,

¹ Matt Brown, *Parish*, 142.

insecurity, clutter, doubts, splintered images, broken family portraits, and do-overs of our real lives.’² Don’t go looking for him anywhere finer. Practice looking for him there. Waiting for him there. Welcoming him there.

² Matt Brown, *Parish*, 143.