

Sermon – The First Sunday of Advent

Mark 13: 24-37

Waiting for this pandemic to be over has become all consuming for many of us. At each stage we have waited – first we waited to see if we could ‘flatten the curve.’ Then we waited for summer to smash the virus, then church to open, then the fear of a fall resurgence to arrive, and now we wait patiently for a vaccine to be distributed to inoculate us against the virus which will allow us to live with less anxiety and more freedom. Waiting is a part of life unfortunately but it can be filled with much anxiety and concern.

I remember when I was in the ordination discernment process I did a lot of waiting to find out if God and the church were calling me forward to ordination. The most painful and anxious wait was following the postulant’s conference. Following a full day of interviews I went home emotionally exhausted and a little disappointed.

In years past the Bishop had told aspirants on the day whether he was going to make them postulants. But in my group they decided to give themselves two weeks. It was a agonizing two weeks. The decision that would be made would either completely change the trajectory of my life or I would return back to Australia to pick up the pieces of my past life there. It was hard not to be anxious.

Advent is a season of waiting. The original Advent season was a penitential one where faithful men and women would fast and look forward to the coming of Christ. Our gospel reading from Mark this morning provides for us a little glimps into what Jesus said to his disciples about waiting for him to return. Many thought it would be very soon after he ascended. But here we are two thousand odd years later still waiting.

In the early medieval years the focus switched from waiting for Jesus second coming to waiting for his birth. It is important I think for us to refocus on the original meaning of Advent.

The world in which we live is terribly fractured. We have lived through a tough time these past few years. I’d suggest that it has always been so. Nations fight against nations often for inexplicable reasons. Millions of people starve to death when the world has enough food. We fight over our religious beliefs but believe in the same God. Family members fight each other for many different reasons. Our political system forces us to take sides against each other rather than focus on who stands with the best policies that will bring equality, healing and prosperity to our communities.

As humans we seem powerless to heal these fractures. They may get papered over for a time. When we think we have solved one problem another problem soon materializes. Advent invites us to acknowledge the depths of our plight and our estrangement from God and the purity of God’s creation.

The Advent hope is that God will, at a time of God's choosing, complete the work begun in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. The collect for today invites us into this hope. When we prayed to God we asked "for the grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which God's son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day we may rise to the life immortal."

So we are waiting, not in passivity and despair, but with hope in our hearts that God will grant us grace to continue to work on things in this temporal world that will continue to shape the world toward the perfect creation that God released when he spoke it into being. We have much to look forward to as we refocus our efforts here at St Luke and St Matthew to reach the many new residents of our neighborhood.

The focus of our gospel today is Jesus proclamation of what will proceed the last days, or the day of his second coming. Jesus tells his disciples what they should expect so that they may be prepared. Just like when we see the early sign of summer by seeing the fig tree sprout its fresh new leaves, so we may be able to see the early sign of Jesus coming with power and great glory."

I couldn't help but think we have so many signs all about us that we all should be woke to the fact that this chaos and confusion has already arrived. Natural calamities are happening the world over – fires, floods, earthquakes, the affects of rising sea levels and warming oceans on vulnerable coastal communities and island nations. We also see the impact of violence and addiction in our communities and endless signs of hopelessness among young, middle and elderly people.

Our political systems are under severe strain and authoritarian leaders are being elected as so-called saviors for certain groups of citizens. Refugees are fleeing war, poverty and violence in huge numbers but are not welcomed in more prosperous and stable countries. Fear of the other has become the societal norm.

We could become drawn into the vortex of hopelessness and despair that is endemic in our society. One of the greatest lies that society tells us is that we don't need God because the purpose and meaning of life is to be found in pleasure. If we believe this lie and focus our life on accumulating wealth and material things and satisfying our every craving we will eventually find the pursuit of pleasure to be a chore and to be completely unfulfilling and hopeless.

Jesus reminds us that when we witness the signs of the coming age we should stand tall and raise our heads. We shouldn't be afraid and let ourselves be cowered by the anxiety and fear of what could come next. Jesus says that whatever happens will come upon all of us the world over. So he counsels that we shouldn't be weighed down by "dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life."

Eugene Peterson contemporizes this verse in The Message this way – “Be on your guard. Do not let the sharp edge of your expectation be dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise the day is going to take you by complete surprise.”

The rhythms of contemporary life make it ever harder to watch and wait with faithfulness. Life just has a habit of pressing down on us so much that we find allocating time to spend with God difficult. This new season of Advent however calls us to vigilance about where we focus our time and energy as we wait. To look forward to Christ’s coming is to refuse to make our peace with the world as it is.

Rather than being consumed by anxious activity or passive consumption, Advent summons us to be people who wait, vigilant and expectant, for the deliverance of God. The birth of Jesus Christ was the beginning of the end times and the beginning of hopeful waiting that the world will be made right once again.

This season of Advent will afford you the opportunity to again reflect on your life to see if you are standing tall, waiting for Jesus despite your own tiredness and anxiety, and with all the chaos and calamities befalling the world. Jesus encourages us to pray that we might have the strength to escape these things that will take place, and the strength to stand before the Son of Man.

May you find that strength as we wait with hopeful hearts.

Amen