

Sermon for Advent I December 3 2023

With the first Sunday of Advent we enter into a new cycle of Gospel readings. This past year we focused on the Gospel of Matthew, and today we begin with the Gospel of Mark, the first Gospel written. There is a distinctive flavor to Mark's telling of the Good News: it is intense, hurried, with not much detail or color commentary. Much of what Mark tells is expanded upon in the other synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke. That becomes particularly important to us in Advent, when we know the full story of the birth of Jesus from years of listening to it each Christmas and singing all those Christmas carols we love. But Mark spends almost no time on that part of Jesus' story. He's much more interested in Jesus' ministry, and so in Advent during this year, it is all about the advent of the ministry of our Lord. Mark is in a hurry to tell us about this, and indeed the word we hear him use most often is "immediately!" And the Jesus he portrays is equally in a hurry. There are things to be done, because this Jesus will not be around for a long time...

...but he'll be back.

In Mark, Advent is not a picture of the impending birth of a divine infant, it's an advent of the impending change in the whole world because of that infant, now grown and teaching and preaching. The language is apocalyptic – by that I mean that it is mystical, imagining the end times and the second coming of Jesus.

Then suddenly, it switches gears, with a mini-parable about fig trees. How do you know when it's about to be summer? When the fig trees start to soften and set buds. You have to watch for the signs, then you know the season is changing.

Jesus uses that pivot to respond to those who want to know exactly when the Son of Man is coming again. He says you can't know exactly when, but when you see the signs he's been talking about, you should be ready. Not "get ready." "Be ready."

Now having to be ready all the time, every day, each moment, is not a recipe for spiritual, emotional or physical health. Think about waiting to hear if your daughter has gone into labor and your grandchild is almost here. Think about waiting in a place ravaged by war and worrying if the next bomb is

going to obliterate your family. Think about waiting to hear results of a medical test. Think about waiting for a call about a job that you want but will upend your life. It is exhausting. That said, getting ready – bracing oneself – is different from being ready. Being ready is being aware that something will happen, and knowing what you want to do to address that. It's the go-bag if you live in a hurricane or fire zone. It's the phone tree so you can check on whomever you need to check on. It's your Plan B. It's the resource list. It's the prayer.

In a way, what we are called upon to do is to be aware that something is coming – and something is always coming, am I right? – so that we can be in a position to respond. It's easier to consider the notion of a go-bag – such a concrete thing! – than it is to consider the kind of thing that Jesus is talking about in the gospel today. How do you get ready for the return of the Son of Man? That's a different kind of readiness.

I'd say that the most important thing we can do is to be aware that such a return is something we cannot pack a go-bag for. Instead, we are being advised to pay attention. Pay attention to the shifts in the world around us. Pay attention to our own relationships with God and with each other. Pay attention to the needs of others. Pay attention, because something will inevitably happen, whatever it may be, and it does no good to hide from it.

Know, too, that this readying is something best done in community, as part of your family of faith. I see it happening every day around here. When someone is grieving, others show up with casseroles and hugs. When someone is awaiting news that may or may not be bad, suddenly there is a lunch invitation. When someone is celebrating something, everyone wants to celebrate with them. We know how to ready ourselves in so many ways, and different people have different gifts. So if we ready ourselves as a community, loving and supporting each other, isn't that the best preparation for whatever comes?

What Jesus is describing here, this advent of a new world, a new life, is actually a joyful one. While we'd like to know exactly when it will happen, and lots of people have spend an inordinate amount of time trying to predict the time, despite Jesus' words that we won't know it until it happens, we have no temporal guides.

So it is incumbent upon us to pay attention. It is incumbent upon us to attend to our relationships, with God and with our community. It is our task to pay attention so that whenever that thing happens, whatever it may be, we have our spiritual house in order.

In this season of Advent, remember that we celebrate the coming of God-With-Us every single year as a way to remember that remarkable things happen, and if we don't pay attention, we might miss it. If we don't tend to our relationships, we might not even notice what – or who – has arrived.

So in these weeks ahead, let's work on our ability to stay aware and attentive for whatever may come our way, and know that our whole community is doing this as well. Eyes open. Hearts hopeful. Souls prepared. Jesus is coming, for Jesus comes every moment of every day if we are looking for him.

Pay attention. Be ready. All shall be well.

Amen.