

The First Sunday in Advent  
Isaiah 64 and Mark 13  
November 27, 2011

In the Name of the One God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

*Where are we?*

I think this is the first question we need to answer this morning.

And I don't mean "*where are we*" geographically.

I mean to ask – *where are we in time?*

Though there are many Sundays when scripture and theology lead us to struggle with where we might be in time, this is a particularly important question today as we mark the first Sunday in Advent.

Today we gather in anticipation of the Incarnation of the Word made flesh, counting down the weeks until Christmas, when we celebrate how our world was transformed through the miracle of Jesus' birth. At the same time, we keep awake and look ahead in anticipation to when Jesus will come again to redeem the entire creation – one that if you read the newspapers seems in desperate need of a savior today.

I know for me it is hard enough to keep track of one aspect of time – the here and now. And my eyes usually roll to the back of my head whenever I hear that the world is going to end. Yet, we are presented with Mark's "little apocalypse" this morning – and we - at least - have to *entertain* his warning and we really *should* do more – we should read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it!

Thankfully, Mark's Gospel does not encourage us to come up with a time table for when Christ will come again. There is no command from Christ to figure out that cosmic puzzle.

The command is simply to keep awake and watch.

But when the world seems to crash all around us, sitting by and leaving the timing of "thy Kingdom come" up to God – is hard to do.

It was hard for the ancient Israelites we hear about in the Old Testament reading today – who felt that God was completely hidden from their sight, from their lives, from their prayers.

It was hard for Jesus' followers, who hear the words "watch and keep awake," and don't know that very soon, they will be asked to watch with Christ as he walks the lonely and humiliating way of the cross.

It was hard for the first hearers of Mark's Gospel, who likely sat in the smoldering ruins of the Temple and a defeated Jerusalem, only a few decades removed from Jesus' miraculous life, death, and resurrection.

How soon can the world crumble after so magnificent a triumph?

We pray "thy kingdom come" – and we pray, as the first hearers of Mark's Gospel likely did and as Isaiah surely did - for God to come among us and consider us once again.

And, as it has always been, it is hard for us to leave the timing of this up to God - especially knowing God doesn't come on the terms we most hope God will come, at the time we feel God is most needed, and in the manner we feel is most effective.

But pray "thy kingdom come" we must....with open eyes and open hearts, with awe and trembling, with wonder and anticipation. And with not a little bit of humility and patience.

Listen again to Jesus in today's Gospel: *Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 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. 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.*" Jesus tells his followers that they will not know the time when the kingdom finally comes. Jesus tells his followers that even he doesn't know the time.

But Jesus tells his followers - and us - to keep alert - to keep vigilant, to watch.

And we will do so these next four weeks of Advent. Just like we do at other times of the liturgical year.

We read this passage from Mark's Gospel every three years on the first Sunday in Advent. We enter church with the greenery around us knowing we are getting ready for Christmas. We come in ready for messages of joy, hope and peace. Messages we all desperately need.

But, instead we get these really dark readings. And hope is harder to see.

We gather in the winter darkness and hear a story that takes place just prior to the beginning of the Passion narrative in Mark's gospel - the story we hear during Holy Week.

Jesus is on his way to the garden, to the high priest, to Golgotha, to the cross.  
Jesus is walking - with great humility - into utter darkness.

I am left wondering whether the Advent timing of the reading is ironic or perfectly situated.

*"In those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

As Mark tells the story, a dark night is coming and Jesus is urging his followers to keep awake.

Jesus tells them: You do not know when the master is coming - in the *evening*, or at *midnight*, or at *cockcrow*, or at *dawn*.

We hear what Jesus says, and his words find resonance and meaning in the faint echoes of the passion narratives we hear each year:

You know the story.

First, Jesus gathers with his friends for a last meal with them:

Mark writes: "When it was *evening*, he came with the twelve..."

Then, Jesus goes to the garden of Gethsemane and prays – it is *midnight*:  
"He came and found them sleeping..."

Later, Peter denies Jesus for a third time:  
"At that moment the *cock crowed* for the second time"

And finally, Jesus is put on trial:  
"As soon as it was *morning*, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate." \*\*

You do not know when the master is coming - in the *evening*, or at *midnight*, or at *cockcrow*, or at *dawn*.

Keep awake. Watch.

*Oh master, how in those ancient days did we not see and recognize all that you were for us? Oh master, how do we not see today?*

Why are we asleep during this time in which we most need to keep awake?

Why are we asleep when your world is in such pain?  
Why are our eyes closed to the injustices – here in our backyard and around the world?  
Why do some of us close our eyes to the very ones trying to wake us up – as people young and old around the world take to the streets to demonstrate against economic, social and environmental injustice?  
Why the killing, the destruction, the drone attacks, the piracy, the exploitation, the abuse, the cover-ups, the violence, the greed?

At times it is too much to see. Oh that the sun would be darkened, and the moon not give its light, and the stars fall from heaven – may we be kept in darkness lest we see and know and have to act.

Isn't it tempting at times to want to remain asleep to what God may be calling us to see?

Or, as it was for Isaiah, isn't it tempting to want to call on God to tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at his presence.

But God doesn't stop the violence. God doesn't redistribute wealth. God doesn't provide super committees with solutions.

So why wake up? What is there to see?  
Sadness, grief, destruction?  
God's inaction?  
Perhaps that is all there is to see.

Or...perhaps there is something more, something just beyond the chaos of our world. Perhaps we need to open our eyes and look more closely - at our history, our present moment, and our future.

Can we look deep into our past and see a baby in a manger? Seemingly powerless?

Can we watch as that child grows up, ministers among God's people, lives as we do, sees our pain – and experiences our full humanity – before offering himself as an ultimate sacrifice for the whole world?

Can we see how humility indeed moved mountains?

Can we see the power in a vulnerable self-offering?

As the world crashed around all those generations who came before us, God arrived to save God's people.

Not in the way they expected.

Not in the way in which they hoped.

But on God's terms.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon we gather today in anticipation of the Christmas season, when we celebrate how our world was transformed through the miracle of Jesus' birth. At the same time, we keep awake and look ahead in anticipation to when Jesus will complete his ministry and come again to redeem all of creation.

It is not always easy to do as we are asked by God. This is not an easy place in time to inhabit. Being watchful and patient - awake and aware - is difficult - for we do not know exactly what we are looking for, how it will arrive, and how it will impact the lives we have created for ourselves.

But as much as we would like to remain in the dark, not see the pain in the world or the unknown ways our lives may change, we must look toward the light and make it our own.

We must shine this light on the injustices impacting our world and on our own fears.

If we hide in the darkness, afraid of what we might see, we may succeed in keeping ourselves blissfully unaware of the pain and brokenness in our lives - but we will also miss out on some of the amazing things God is doing right now as God shows us glimpses of the coming Kingdom in our own time.

And we would surely miss out on what God would have us do to help one another recognize these amazing glimpses of incarnate love in action.

So keep alert, awake and watchful: for God's reign, for the hope of Christ made manifest in our world, for your opportunity to share that light and hope with just one other person – for your opportunity to give the greatest gift you can when you wake up on Christmas Day.

Amen.

\*\*These connections between chapters 13 and 14 were pointed out by David Lose in his recent post on the Working Preacher website: [http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear\\_wp.aspx?article\\_id=529](http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=529)