

St. Francis Episcopal Church
Parker County, Texas
Sermon for November 30, 2014 ~ The First Sunday of Advent
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Jesus said to his disciples, "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. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." (Mark 13:24-27)

Here on the First Sunday of Advent, four weeks before Christmas, you may have trouble with that kind of talk! Most mainline Christians do. We prefer to leave the discussion of last things and the second Coming of Christ to the more flamboyant, television preachers and the writers of books that other people buy as year after year passes and the signs of the end come and go.

But here it is in our own Bible! We can't just rip those pages out and let the end time be somebody else's problem. It is our problem, too, because, like them, we are people of "The Book." Mark was writing during the first century when Titus and the Roman army had entered Jerusalem and destroyed the magnificent Temple, which was the center of the life of God's People. Persecution of Christians had begun in earnest. False prophets were preaching that this was the end time and some were even claiming to be the Messiah. Mark was writing to a Church that was struggling not only to survive but also to interpret the confusing events that were almost overwhelming to their faith and their understanding of discipleship. Mark needed to present the Gospel of Christ in a way that would speak to their fears.

Was it the end time? No. Obviously not. Jesus had predicted the fall of the Jerusalem Temple but did not make it synonymous with the coming of the Son of Man. Had Christ returned? No. Obviously not. If he had, things would be better. What was Mark's message then and what is it for us? Let me suggest three things:

Mark is telling us that we need to encourage one another to endure and not lose hope. For Mark, being discouraged into thinking Christ will never return was a danger as threatening as believing that Christ had already come again. We must not be falsely optimistic or falsely discouraged. Christ will come again with signs that no one can miss. Until then, we need endurance to continue in his mission.

I refuse to become involved in a debate with a Biblical literalist about the signs of the end time and the second coming of Christ. I don't find such speculation worthwhile, helpful, or even consistent with the example of Jesus, who was content not to know. He did say, "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will endure." And it is with his words that we must encourage one another as we concentrate on his ongoing incarnate work in the world.

In our own day, we need encouragement like we've never needed it before. Encouragement is encouraging only when it starts with the reality of things as they are. For example, racial tensions, protests and violence related to actions of law enforcement and decisions of grand juries, political polarization, beheadings, terrorist threats, and reports of outrageous behavior of shoppers on Black Friday, are just a few of the examples that have impacted us recently.

But there is hope! God is still in our midst, calling **us** to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth, and the leaven in society. We are supposed to make a difference. But the kind of difference we are supposed to make stems not from the devices and desires of our own hearts, but from the enduring word of Jesus the Messiah. So, let us encourage one another with this word. And, from our own encouragement, let us give courage and hope to the world around us.

Mark is also telling us that there must be urgency about our faith. Any teaching about the Second Coming and the end time that either by panic or neglect draws us from Christ's mission is from a false prophet.

Without goals, deadlines, and priorities, life falls apart. Do you have a "when I get around to it" approach to your life, your marriage, your intellectual pursuits, your career, your role in the congregation? I suggest to you that the time will come when things can't be put off anymore. Will you be ready when that time comes?

Think through a little time management exercise with me for a moment. Mentally, make a list of ten things you want to accomplish in order of priority. Now suppose you learn that you have a terminal illness. Take another look at your list. And, if I tell you that you have only six months to live, will it affect your list? This list will make your "Bucket List" insignificant. Will you spend what time and energy you have left in a different manner than you would if you expected to live for years?

Isn't it about time? Time to get your spiritual life in order. Time to begin that daily prayer discipline you've been meaning to start. Time to join that Christian Formation class or Bible Study. Time to sign up to help with an outreach effort with our poor, homeless, hungry, hurting neighbors. Time to make a commitment to spend more time with your loved ones. Time to change your approach to your business. Isn't it about time? Don't you think it would be nice to come to the end of things and feel that things were in order – God's order? Our faith has urgency about it.

Finally, Mark's message tells us that when our lives remain open to God's eternal purpose, we find a source of transforming power. God has a vision for creation and we have a role to play in it. If you were to remove the apocalyptic passages from the Bible, you would take away its message that God created all of this with a purpose. If you take away the eternal purpose in the heart of God that is at the center of God's creative activity, what difference does anything, ultimately, make?

At the center of things there is a God who cares enough about his creation to give it an eternal purpose. If we could fully know that purpose, we would surely destroy it. But God gives us a glimpse and beckons us to trust the rest to him and align our purposes with the divine purpose.

From the fig tree in today's gospel, we can learn a lesson of timeliness and inner life. Through each season it grows, gathering its vitality within until it suddenly bursts with new life in the spring. Then follows the summer, when its fruitfulness becomes visible to everyone. At last comes the harvest, its final vindication.

So it is with the people of God. No matter which season we find ourselves in now, we are to be fulfilled with and transformed by our life in Christ. Jesus promised us life that is both abundant and eternal. No one, not even the Master himself, knows when the final harvest will come for us, but it comes to each of us and to every generation as a time of fulfillment.

Jesus wants us to know that God reigns over history. God means for things to come out God's way. You and I are called to align our lives and our priorities with his and participate in the redemption of creation. God comes to us, not only from the past and in the present moment, but from the future as well. The Lover of our souls is always there in the end – the end of our rope, the end of our patience, the end of our resources, the end of a relationship, the end of our life, the end of time. And God's divine purpose transforms and saves us.

Thus the promised future harvest points us back to our meantime living. No matter what the wintry appearances of our present time, God's vision is forming before and through us, by the promise and power of God. We live in the shadow of eternity. That is no reason for fearful and hysterical expectation. But it means that day-by-day we are called to carry out God's mission. We are to live in such a way that it does not matter when the Messiah comes again. We will be ready, for we will be going about the work to which he has called us.