

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Christ the King Sunday/First Sunday of Advent
Sunday, November 26, 2023
10 AM

Text: Mark 13:24-37

Theme: Those Who Dream...keep awake (hope)

[prayer]

Today's sermon is brought to you by the letter 'A.' 'A' for advent. 'A' for awake. 'A' for apocalypse.

Mark chapter 13 is called the "Little Apocalypse." It is a stark and violent vision of the end of the world. It's also an unsettling passage to start off our Advent season. Rumors of apocalypse do not usually evoke feelings of hope, peace, joy, and love.

And yet, here we are on the First Sunday of Advent, and Mark is asking us to contemplate the apocalypse. His message is simple: In every ending, there is a beginning. And *this* ending is actually good news. It's good news because it marks an arrival. After all, advent is just a fancy word for arrival.

Today we begin to spiritually prepare for that historic arrival some two thousand years ago. But we are also called to anticipate an altogether *different* arrival: the arrival of Jesus, not as infant lowly, infant holy, but in his full power and glory – the Son of Man ushering in the final, eternal reign of God.

[pause]

Three times today we heard Jesus command us to "Keep awake!" or "Stay alert!" It's a command directed at each one of us.

During my first on-call shift as a hospital chaplain, I was paged to a cardiac arrest. The experience was physically and emotionally jarring. I had been on the job less than a week. The pager on my desk began beeping and vibrating, rattling violently

against the wood. Then the on-call phone began buzzing. And then the announcement came over the PA system: “Code Blue, Radiology. Code Blue, Radiology.”

I did not know where Radiology was yet, but I didn’t need to – I just needed to follow the rush of doctors and nurses out of the stairwell, all running in the same direction. The patient had coded in a CT machine. When I arrived, there were already ten people in the room, each carrying out a precise, pre-assigned task. My job was to support the family. I watched the medical team’s resuscitation efforts for a few minutes, then left to call the patient’s wife.

I think of that first on-call shift when I read Jesus’ command to “Stay alert!” The urgency of his tone brings back the jolt of adrenaline I would feel with every buzz of that pager. It was never a question of ‘if’ a crisis would unfold, but rather ‘when.’ And while I could not predict or control the moment of arrival, I could remain alert. I kept myself ready to respond quickly and compassionately.

Every code I answered, every death I attended, was a little apocalypse to someone – the end of the world as *they* knew it, a world with their loved one alive and whole. While the sun and moon continued to shine, and the stars remained in the sky, a single event had remade their world.

We all have faced those kinds of moments, moments when there was no going back to the way things used to be. Change – no matter the kind, no matter how small – can feel like a little death; this is why we resist it, why we grieve it. The last time I preached this text we were closing out our first year of pandemic. So much had changed in a short period of time. And ever since the world has felt unsettled, restless. Little apocalypses continue to unfold around us.

But the thing to remember about an apocalypse is that the suffering and destruction are not its totality. It’s what they signal, what they point to, that matters. The word ‘apocalypse’ means ‘revelation’ – a revealing of something new. Revelation is an awakening. Awakening can feel destructive, or at least deconstructive. Revelation upsets our routines, our ideologies, upends the status quo, forces us to accept the illusion of stability and deal with the ways we are blinded to reality.

Our Scripture readings today ask us to acknowledge the wreckage of our world. Like Lent, Advent is also a season of lament and penitence. Both our readings from Isaiah and the Psalms are full of lament for a world where things have gone badly wrong. But lament is paradoxically rooted in the hope of God. Lament says, *This is not the way things are supposed to be, Lord! Show us the way things are supposed to be!*

What can the wreckage teach us? What is being uncovered? What is being revealed? And how do we meet that revelation with faith and courage?

The answer lies in the spiritual discipline of hope.

Theologian Emilie M. Townes writes,

“Hope means we have opened our eyes, hearts, minds, souls, very spirits and now see and feel and touch and smell the joy and the agony living in the fractures of creation...”¹

I like Dr. Townes’ description of hope as opening ourselves to the fullness of our world – the good and the bad. Hope is not just a feeling; it’s a discipline. To hope is to practice a spirituality of attention. When we have hope, we become awake, alert, and attentive to both the brokenness of our world and God’s healing dreams for His creation. When we have hope we train ourselves to look for the signs of God’s presence amid the wreckage. The Holy Spirit prompts us to pay attention to the Gospel unfolding around us. God is at work everywhere, dismantling our empires and building His peaceable kingdom.

As a local church our mission is to discern God’s dream for our immediate community and then help make that dream a reality. This work begins with being attentive to what is happening in our neighborhood. One of the questions on the Bishop’s M.I.L.E. assessment at charge conference was “Tell us what God is doing with and through your neighbors to transform your community. How are you being invited to partner with God?” We don’t always have to address a need by inventing our own programs of justice and mercy. Instead, we are called to stay

¹ From the transcript of her keynote address at the “Migration and Border Crossings” Conference co-hosted by Columbia Seminary and the Emory Center for Law and Religion, February 2019. The full transcript is featured in Columbia Theological Seminary’s online publication, @ This Point—Theological Investigations in Church and Culture, Fall 2019—Vol. 13, No.2.

alert to the ways that God is already at work through our neighbors and then show up as helpful partners. Our work with the 2nd Harvest Mobile Market is a good example of partnering with God’s dream of a world where everyone is fed.

Because we began our Advent observance a week early, we skipped the Gospel reading for Christ the King Sunday, which is Matthew 25:31-46. You probably know this parable well. At the end of time, Jesus the King will separate the sheep from the goats – the people who saw and served Jesus in their neighbors experiencing life on the margins, and the people who did not. Again, the emphasis is on this spirituality of attentiveness. Do we see what God sees? Do we value what God values?

In her statement for today’s artwork, Hannah Garrity quotes the late U.S. Representative and civil rights activist John Lewis, who said, “In the bosom of every human being there is the spark of divinity and it is the spark of something that is sacred, and holy, and special, and that we don’t have a right to destroy.”² She concludes this quote by enjoining us to “live into our spark” and “seek it in each person we meet.”³ Amid life’s little apocalypses, where do you see opportunities to partner with God in nurturing that divine spark?

[pause]

Both advent and apocalypse are moments of divine invasion. Two thousand years ago God stepped into time and space as a tiny baby and ended the world as people knew it. No more was God distant, apart, other from us. Instead, God became one of us, with a body capable of experiencing both transcendent joy and immense suffering. Because of that advent, we have the assurance that God is with us, holding our suffering, holding us together.

In return we hold the hope that one day God will step back into time and space. Again, His second coming will be the end of the world as we know it. But it will also herald the beginning of a new world perfected in His image – a new heaven and a new earth where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have at last passed away (Rev. 21:1, 4).

² Winfrey, Oprah. “Oprah’s Master Class, Remembering John Lewis.” Oprah Winfrey Network. July 19, 2020.

³ Artist statement by Hannah Garrity. A Sanctified Art LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

In the meantime, we keep awake by cultivating God's dream for the world. Christians have always been called to keep our feet firmly planted on the earth and our eyes firmly fixed on heaven. As we awaken to the lives of our neighbors, especially those who are living on the margins of our community, we are also called to dream of that future day when the Kingdom of God will be complete. Even now God is birthing something new. We are witnessing the labor pains of a *new* world. And that new world brings us hope.

To hope is to dream with our eyes wide open. This Advent may our eyes be opened wide. May we see our present tribulations as a revelation of what can be, not just what is. We are the laborers in the master's house. And while we do not know when Jesus will come again, we know he is coming. He has entrusted us with the building of his kingdom and so we have good work to do. Let us take care not to be found sleeping on the job.

Amen.