

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he^{is} near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert;^{for} you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

This is the word of the Lord **Thanks be to God.**

"Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved." (ps 80)

FIRST READING: Isa 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— ² ^{as} as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. ⁴ From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. ⁵ You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. ⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. ⁷ There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered^{us} us into the hand of our iniquity. ⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

This is the word of the Lord **Thanks be to God.**

“Stay Awake”

I will begin this morning with a marvelous story that Rev. Jim Somerville tells which is appropriate for the season, a story of a mess that he made that was just simply too much for him to clean up. He explains that at his church it was a long-standing tradition to put up a live tree in the Sanctuary just before the First Sunday in Advent. The tree was lovingly brought back each year by a couple in his congregation from their vacation home in the mountains of NC. And the members of their Sunday School class would come in during the week to decorate it with lovely handmade Chrismons and tiny strands of white lights, long stands of beads, blown glass balls, and a lighted angel on the top with moving wings. Jim says that by the time he got to the sanctuary on Saturday afternoon to practice his sermon the beautiful tree was fully decorated, lending its wonderful pine fragrance to the room, and was firmly in place. “Firmly in place,” Jim says, “because I tried to move it. I noticed that one branch of the tree was sticking out in such a way that it would poke our pianist in the back when she sat down to play. I thought if I could move the tree back just six inches, it wouldn’t poke her, and everything would be fine. So, I flopped down on my belly and saw that the tree was standing in a base that looked as if it would slide easily across the carpeted floor. I took hold of the trunk of the tree and slid it ever so gently away from the piano, inch by inch across the carpet, and everything was going fine until.... I felt the tree’s center of gravity shift, and the trunk in my hands begin to tilt toward me. I saw one leg of the base start to bend, and that’s when I knew that it was too late, that the tree was falling and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. It went over with a tremendous crash, with the sound of glass balls breaking and beads popping and limbs cracking and all of it right on top of me. When I crawled out from underneath it, I additionally saw a big puddle of water on the carpet, pine needles on the floor, and the angel far away in the center aisle with its skirt over its head. There, also on the fourth pew back, was a small, brown lizard that must have traveled with the tree from NC.” Oh my. Well, Jim ultimately called the chair of the sanctuary committee, and he says that “after a long silence, she told him to not touch anything else”. She and her daughter were on their way. And indeed, they cleaned it all

up, even securing the top of the tree to the walls on both sides with invisible fishing line, and replacing the angel on top, with her skirts smoothed down and her dignity restored. "I don't know what became of the lizard," he says.¹

Ah. You have to laugh a little bit. But the point is that this is in part what Advent is about. Today, as you know, is the first Sunday in the new church year, the beginning of the season called Advent. During its four weeks, we remember and celebrate the first **coming** of God in Christ into the world...as a humble baby born in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago. He came to be with us and for us, to be our Messiah, not only taking upon himself our lot, but to give us his light and life and love. BUT during Advent, we also renew our state of alertness, our anticipation and preparedness for his second **coming** too, when Jesus, the Son of Man, will return into the world in all his power and glory and will gather the elect unto himself.

You know, many churches these days choose to not really deal much with this other part to the meaning of advent, with the second coming. All the apocalyptic language about prophetic signs in the darkening sun, about stars falling from heaven, about coming anguish and terror, doesn't seem to fit with their concept of a festive holiday season. Nor does the concept of being alert and attentive for the return of the Savior of the world. No, the second advent of Christ doesn't have a message that fosters much holiday cheer for many Christians these days.

However, this is a misunderstanding. The second advent of the Son of Man should make all of us be of very good cheer. It includes a most important, critical, and yes, extremely hopeful message which occupies a significant place in our doctrine, supported in the biblical literature. It's actually works on two levels...the first reflects the end time, when God will come to restore the Creation to the way it was intended to be.² The weight of anticipation of our divine deliverance for this is expressed in the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah, read this morning, "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!*" His cry is all of our cries...for God to liberate us, to defeat the evils of this world, to right all wrongs, and clean up the mess we've made, the mess that is just too big for us to clean up on our own, the mess that is much bigger

¹ Jim Somerville. <https://asermonforeversunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Jim-Somerville-Advent-1B-Isaiah-64.pdf> (accessed 11-30-23).

² David Lose. "*Advent 1 B: Small Things*". <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/11/advent-1-b-small-things/>

than Jim Sommerville's toppled Christmas tree. And we are promised that this day will come.

It will be tumultuous, but yet it will be a day when begins a time of no more pain or disease, no war, or tears, no anguish or desolation, no death anymore. All creation will be made new. This is, as one commentator says, "*not simply a doctrine to which we subscribe but a defining reality that impacts our faith, our purpose, and lives, a defining, redemptive reality.*"³

But also, also, also, the second coming of Christ is about the redemptive action of God. It is about the redemptive action of God, and it is therefore **not only to a future** and cataclysmic end time event but rather to God's in-breaking in and through Jesus' **already accomplished action** on the cross.⁴ Mark, in particular, pointed to this, in his retelling of Jesus' apocalyptic parable here in the 13th chapter of his gospel. The landowner, going away on a journey, commands the doorkeeper to keep watch because he will not know when the master of the house will come back...in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow or at dawn. David Lose calls these "time-stamps" and Leroy Huizenga calls them "time mirrors".^{5,6} The times are to call to our minds the scenes of Jesus' passion (Jesus' gathering with his disciples at evening, his betrayal and arrest at midnight, his denial at cockcrow and his sentencing to death at dawn). Quoting Rev. Lose, "Here, Mark points to *the broken figure of Jesus on the cross to reveal that God was **already** at work in the world, tearing to pieces all that would divide us from God, closing the gap between what we deserve and what God wants to give us, promising to be with us and for us in and through all things.*"⁷

Mark likely wrote his gospel during Nero's horrible persecution of the Christians in Rome (66 – 70 AD), and his intent, and probably that of most apocalyptic literature, was not so much to ensure that believers were prepared for the judgement of the end of times (to ensure that they were "ready" in this way), but it was to keep them alert, to keep them encouraged and focused on the revelation of God **with them now**, to bring them hope during their times of suffering,

³ Mark Allan Powell. Commentary on Mark 13:24-37. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2265 (accessed 11-29-14).

⁴ David Lose.

⁵ David Lose

⁶Leroy Huizenga quoted in: Michael Toy, "Bearing Witness, Advent 1 (B)- December 3, 2023. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/bearing-witness-advent-1-b-december-3-2023/> (accessed 12-1-23).

⁷ David Lose.

and fear. It was to be aware of the unfolding divine mystery, the ongoing action of a boundlessly loving God amongst them.⁸ It was to encourage them to persevere despite it all, for Jesus had defeated the greatest enemy, death, and evil in their world was doomed.

Friends, evil is real and still very present in our world too. We know this. This year we've had our fill of it...violent and hate-based acts, persecution, frightening weather events, senseless death of innocents, overwhelming pain and suffering. In fact, 2023 has felt quite apocalyptic and the signs of the budding fig tree might be easily imagined. But friends, just as it was for Mark's audience and billions of believers since, the intent of apocalyptic texts like this one, is not to get us trying to predict the end's date and time and to live in fear of it, but to bring us hope. It is to first...reassure us all that we know the end of the story. God is coming to clean up the messes we've made, messes far too big for us to clean up. And second, we are to be reminded that since that day on the cross when the curtain in the Temple was torn in two, when the sky turned dark in the middle of the day, God's Spirit has been set loose on this earth. We have been witness to his presence each day as a constant reminder of the coming end of "*our present hardships and misery and the beginning of the age to come.*"⁹ In fact, each time we see good in our midst, even more each time we are urged to do the good, to bear one another's burdens and champion the needs of the least, the last and the lost, each time we are encouraged to reach out to another in love or are moved to do some small gesture of kindness and sacrifice, Jesus is invading the structures of this hurting world with a divine redemptive grace that is part of the age to come.

So, advent is a time to be of good cheer, of holiday cheer, giving thanks for Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. For he has come and will come again in a cloud with power and great glory to silence evil's terrible voice forever, cleaning up our mess and gathering us to himself. For now, we need both wait and bear witness. We need be aware of His spirit, loose in this world, and of God's divine mystery unfolding in our midst and we need be busy entering likewise into

⁸ Michael Toy.

⁹ Craddock FB. Luke. Interpretation. A Bible-Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. John Knox Press;1990: 248.

solidarity with its suffering and pain, always listening.... listening.... listening for the whisper of Messianic hope: Stay awake. Happy New Year, brothers and sisters. Amen.

Alan Boesak's Advent Credo

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss...

This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction...

This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever...

This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world..

This is true: to me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo, I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers...

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history...

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.